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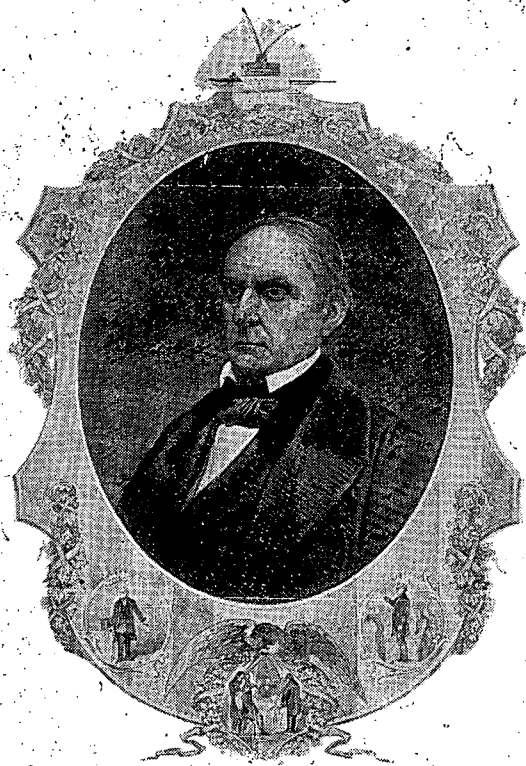
**WILD MEN FOR HELL'S
FRONTIER!**

by **TOM ROAN**

**SATAN SENDS THE
BUCKSKIN BRIGADE**

by **DEL RAYBURN**

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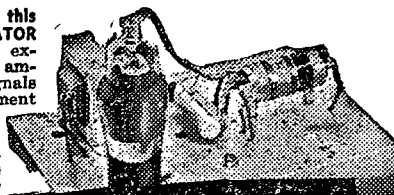
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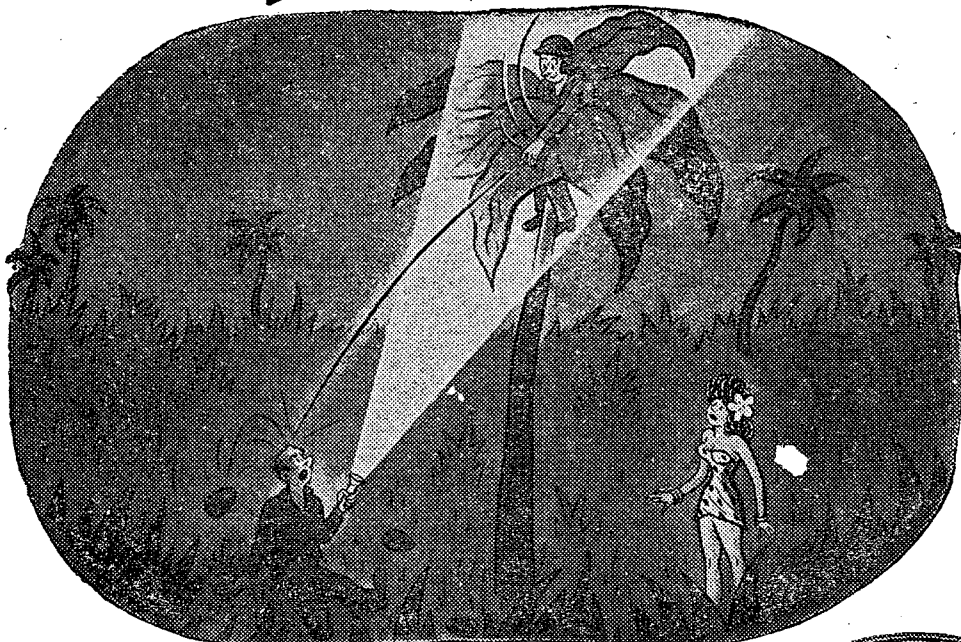
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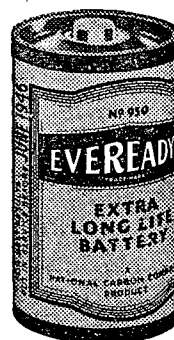


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★ ROUND-UP ★

IN an old adobe hut about ten miles this side of Border Springs, there lives a withered old-timer named Jake Sydel. Sixty years ago he was a notorious two-gun man. He shot up the town every Saturday night and rode with a price on his head until he made his peace with the law. Nowadays Jake is just another has-been, silver-haired and bent. He can't fork a horse anymore, but he makes out pretty well with an old Model A. And he still, to the amusement of the populace, packs his twin sixguns whenever he steps outside his hut.

"Aren't they heavy?" we once asked him, and his answer was significant:

"Ever since I heerd Red Samuels was on the shoot for me, I've been plumb scared to go without 'em. That was back in 1885," he added thoughtfully.

"But there's law and order in Border Springs!" we protested. "We have police and courts and jails. You're not allowed to 'go on the shoot' anymore."

But the old-timer only slapped his two guns and answered, "Them's the only law I ever heerd tell of. And packing a gun is a habit that's hard to break."

It sure is, old-timer. We're still packing them. Only today they're likely to measure 10 inches across the mouth. Today nearly everyone in the whole dang-busted world is walking in fear with guns at their sides. "Plumb scared," all the nations of the world are "on the shoot." Every once in a while, one, or maybe two or three, will bust loose and a lot of people will get hurt. Then we'll have a short breather until the next time, but we're careful to keep the hair triggers filed down fine.

And yet, today there is law and order in Border Springs. In a land where, sixty years before, sixguns were "the only law I ever heerd of", peace now reigns resoundingly. No more bloody range wars, no more personal feuds terminating in violent death. No more arguments and quarrels settled by the thud of striking bullets. As the thunder of heavy artillery in the East and West grew louder and more deadly, the sixguns of Border Springs softened to a feeble pop—and then stopped altogether.

What's the answer, old-timer? How did you do it?

"Wal," the old-timer answered, scratching his head, "fust of all there was a renegade from across the Border who just got to be so plumb mean and killed so many people, he just natcherly invited some action. But this back-shootin' gunslick had himself a big gang, and no one man could stand 'em all off. So, a few o' us began lookin' around with a view to forming a vigilante committee.

"Trouble was," he continued, "we couldn't decide if we hated the bandit worse'n we did each other. Would you believe it, there wasn't ten friendly men in these parts? The farmers hated the ranchers, an' the ranchers hated the sheepmen. They all hated the storekeepers. An' 'feelin' was runnin' so high between the Methodist Ladies' Auxiliary an' the Baptist Sewing Circle, by golly, they wuz 'nigh ready to shoot on sight too!"

"Howsomever, things finally got so bad a vigilante committee was formed—though mind, they didn't trust each other much more'n they did the rustlers—an' all together they rode out an' hung the killer.

"They had to chase him a long way—near five hundred miles—and when they got him, most everyone wanted to go right home. So they did. The emergency that had brought them together was over and they went back to quarreling again right away. Boothill began to fill up.

"Then the desperate citizens imported a peace officer—a wise, strapping Oklahoman who made a powerful speech on the day he pinned on his star:

"'I'm shooting the guns in this town,' he declared, slapping his swinging sixgun. 'No one else. Understand? When you cross the county line, leave your argyments to the law. I'll settle 'em.'"

It was as easy as that. Border Springs was at peace, law and order in the saddle.

Well, Jake, the freedom loving nations also had some back-shootin' bandits who murdered innocent people. No one nation could stand them off, so a vigilante committee was formed. Together they fought and defeated the killers. But, Jake, as soon as the shootin' was over, danged if the committee didn't start bellerin' again. They could win a war—but were havin' a pack o' trouble winning the peace.

Border Springs' strapping sheriff had the right idea, "When you cross the county line, leave your argyments to the law."

Our sheriff must be the United Nations Organization—Border Springs did it. We can do no less!

—THE EDITOR

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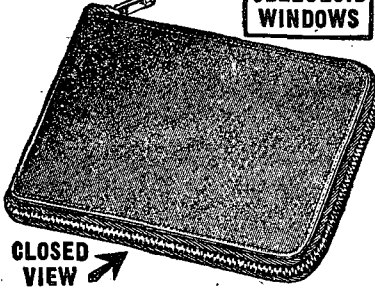
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Slaughter Sends a Sixgun Message

By J. Carroll



The fighting odds were forty-five to three against him, but strapping John Slaughter was damned if a bloodthirsty Border gang would keep him out of fertile San Pedro Valley!

ALTHOUGH John Slaughter is famous for being the last of roaring Tombstone's gunfighting sheriffs, he was a cattle man at heart. When he first gazed on San Pedro Valley in Arizona, he knew instinctively that it was cow country, and he lost no time in obtaining vast tracts of range land.

For stock he looked to Mexico, where the opulent Dons had so many cows that they couldn't keep track of them and sold them for a pittance.

But south of the Rio Grande there also were many bands of murderous thieves who thought more of a peso than of a man's life.

However, Slaughter wanted range cattle, *bandidos* or no. He had practically fought from Louisiana, the place of his birth, through Texas and New Mexico into Arizona; the Mexican bandits weren't now going to scare him away from his life-long plans.

One day, after he had comfortably settled his young wife and baby in a new cabin in the valley, Slaughter loaded twelve thousand dollars in Mexican silver dollars into the saddle bags slung over a pack mule and reined for Sonora. Accompanying him were Old Bat, a former slave who had remained with the Slaughters after the close of the Civil War, and John Roberts.

Upon arriving at the outskirts of Magdalena, Slaughter hired six vaqueros and made camp. Almost immediately he purchased all the available cattle nearby and herded them to camp. But he still had most of his money.

In the afternoon the galloping beat of numerous horses thundered out of the Sierra Madres canyons to the west. Then forty-five heavily-armed riders streaked past the small encampment.

"Who are they?" Slaughter asked of the nearest vaquero.

"Bandits," was the ominous reply.

The riders hadn't molested them, so Slaughter gave little thought to danger. But when twilight fell he grew a little worried. The vaqueros had visited Magdalena and returned with dire warnings: the bandits had learned

of the gringo cattle buyer's twelve thousand dollars and were intent on robbing him. One by one the vaqueros had found excuses to leave the camp—some to nurse relatives suddenly taken ill; others to bury recently deceased parents. Slaughter and his two companions were left alone.

Quietly they slipped into town, seeking the protection of thick adobe walls. But at each door they were met with the same answer: "No! The *bandidos* would kill us too!" Even the jingle of a silver reward couldn't persuade the townspeople to shelter the Americans; they would have to fight it out—with the odds at forty-five to three.

Undaunted, the three men glided cautiously through the shadows of the town. Outside, they mounted and spurred their horses toward the canyons of the Sierra Madres, leaving a clear trail for the bandits to follow.

In a very narrow canyon—through which horses had to go single file—Slaughter and his men scrambled up to conceal themselves behind huge basalt boulders on a high ledge.

They hadn't long to wait. Pounding hoofs soon made the canyon ring. The drunken riders came yelping like a pack of bloodhounds on the scent. Through the clear moonlight Slaughter watched the would-be robbers fork into the narrow canyon.

At the proper moment he signaled; and instantly three Winchester cracked in unison, felling three attackers. Repeatedly the echoes of cracking rifles reverberated between the rocky walls. The daring bandits, quickly sobered by the loss of about a dozen of their number, let out the frightened wail of a pack of cowards and spurred their mounts viciously to the rear; they no longer wanted any part of the gringo's twelve thousand dollars.

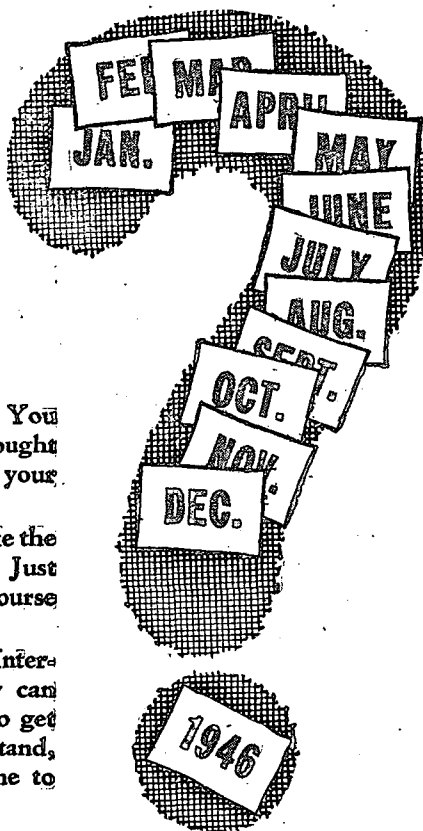
With the coming of dawn, the three Americans returned to camp. Slaughter nonchalantly proceeded to purchase all the stock his money could buy. A few days later he stretched out a trail herd and pointed them for San Pedro Valley. With this herd safe on his range, Slaughter started the first large scale cattle industry in Arizona.

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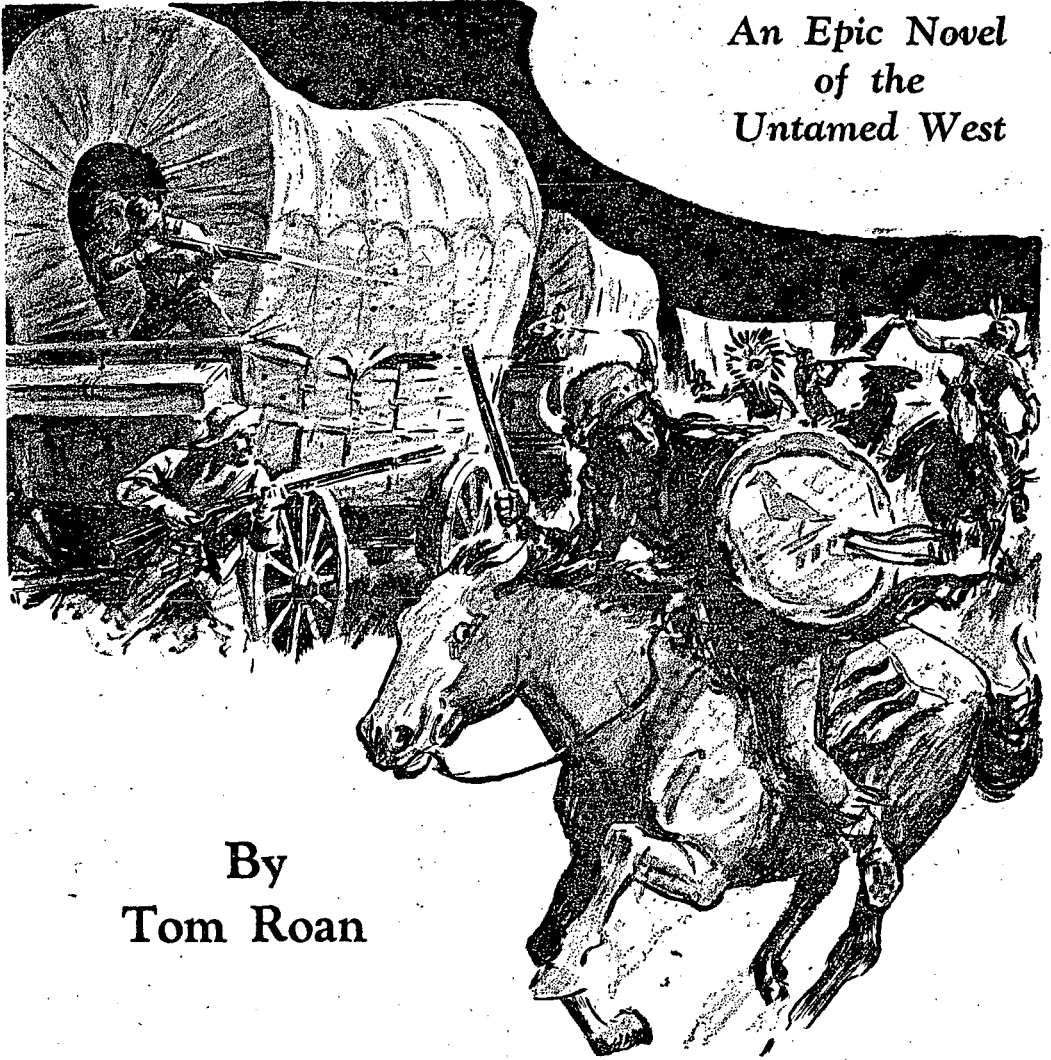
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of the
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By
Tom Roan

Before the wagon-train of freedom-loving pioneers could hope to settle in Montana Territory, they must decide whether the notorious Captain Jesse Blood was the square-shooting leader that frontiersmen swore by—or the cold-blooded, murdering Army renegade he seemed. . . . For the wrong decision would change decent homesteads to lonely, forgotten graves.

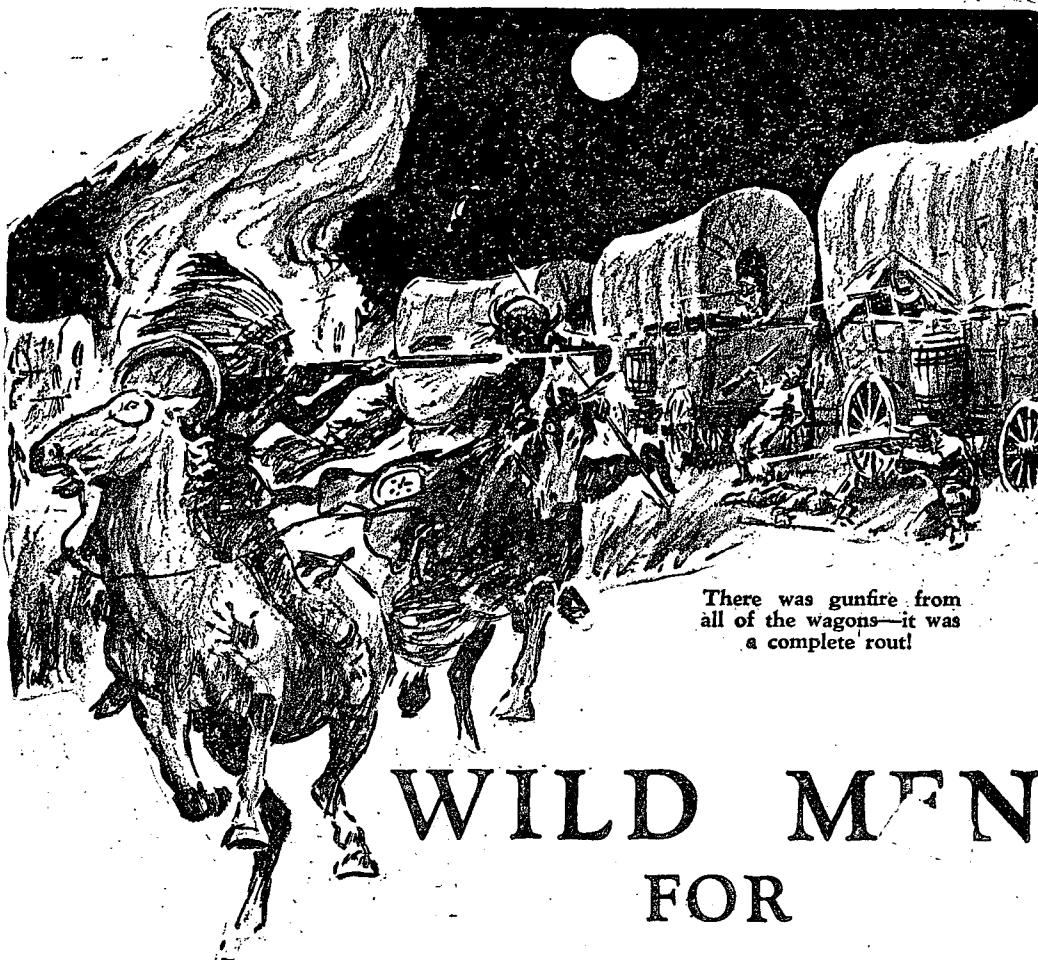
Chapter I.

ONE ACE TOO MANY

THE two puffs of smoke had quickly turned to pale-blue rings, slowly blowing through the mud-chinked windows in the rear wall of the long room. The rumbling, shrieking and bellowing of half-drunken song, the wailing of fiddles, the plunking of banjos

and the pound of dancing feet had suddenly stopped. All, the participants could do, was stand and stare. Staring with incredulity at the two fast shots that had so suddenly and unexpectedly thundered the hilarity into an awful silence.

However, Bull Buzzby's Paint Rock Post was used to such things. A tall, wide-spread fort of mud, log and stone, it stood on the west bank of the Missouri, perched high on



There was gunfire from
all of the wagons—it was
a complete rout!

WILD MEN FOR HELL'S FRONTIER

the great multi-colored mound known from one end of the river to the other as Paint Rock Bluffs. Begun as an honest trading post in the early '60's it had grown steadily, right on into those hectic '70's, its reputation growing with it, until it had become the largest and most dangerous dive on the far frontier. But despite all it had seen, this latest shooting had been swift enough to make men's hair stand on end.

Across the table in the southwest corner, a burly gambler lay sprawled forward, his bearded face resting in a large pile of gold coins and poker chips. Five rumped cards were tightly gripped in his left hand, the right hand still a balled fist around the cowhorned butt of a double-barreled German pistol.

The dead gambler's opponent stood against

the wall, calmly viewing the situation. Cradled in his right hand was a smoking six-shooter. He spoke in a lazy drawl, devoid of any excitement:

"Considering the joker, a man might make five, but I'll be damned if there's a poker deck east or west of the Missouri that packs six aces.

"Houseman," his tone lifted only slightly as he glanced toward the long, hewn-log bar to his left, "I'm ready to cash in, I'll take six thousand nine hundred dollars in gold. I am not very fond of picture money."

There was no answer for at least ten seconds. Death rarely struck just one blow in Paint Rock Post.

Men from California to Maine, from the mouth of the Columbia River to Florida, had

heard of Bull Buzzby. He was ponderous like his name, barrel-waisted and bull-necked. He had a shock of wild red hair and a wide mattress of beard spreading down his brawny bosom. He stood behind the bar now as if transfixed, one big red ham of a hand balled into a fist around the squat dark neck of a whiskey bottle, the other clamped over a glass, an unbelieving light in his lion-yellow eyes.

The dead man across the table was almost equally well-known. Many men had tangled horns with Slick Dudley, who was sharp and shrewd when it came to cards, dice, wheel or any other type of gambling. In the two years he had been the master of the games it was probably an understatement when it was said that he had killed eleven men in the huge, three-story Paint Rock Post.

IT SEEMED incredulous that such a man should die so quickly at the hands of a mere youth, and yet as Bull Buzzby continued to stare he could see that he was not a youth at all. He would guess him closer to thirty, medium weight, lean and hard, face darkened by the winds and sun. A slouch black hat that might have been made for a parson sat on the side of his head. His hair was long and dark, reddened on the ends by the sun, his eyes the coldest and bluest ever seen in these parts and yet just now they seemed to sparkle with half-mirthful little lights.

Buzzby seemed to be taking his measure, one hand still on the bottle, the other still on the glass. Gunfire would come again, fast and furiously, if this king of Paint Rock Bluffs gave the signal. It was no surprise when he smiled as he spoke. Bull Buzzby often smiled just before he was going to have a man killed.

"Six thousand an' nine hundred dollars, eh?" The words appeared to drone through his nose. "That's a hell of a lot of money, stranger. What seemed to be the trouble with yuh an' Slick Dudley?"

"To many aces in one deck." The younger man's lip twitched as if about to smile. "I caught him three times in a row. He has cards up either sleeve, and I don't know how many you'll find inside his hat. You can look him over at your leisure. I've said I'm cashing in!"

"An' yuh called 'im," Buzzby was ignoring the last remark, "or did yuh just shoot 'im under the table without callin'?"

"I called him." Now the younger man really smiled. "He saw he was trapped and went for his pistol, the quickest way I know to go to hell."

"So I see, stranger," Buzzby sneered. "I still say, though, six thousan' an' nine hundred is a lot of money."

"The chips on the table will bear me out." A low hardening seemed to be creeping into

the younger man's tone. "The deck, the cards in his hand, in his sleeves and his hat will prove the rest of it. And, now, Buzzby," the tone was really hardening, "I'm waiting for my money. When you look over our hands you'll find that I held a pair of aces and three queens. Slick still holds of king of spades—and four aces."

"Plum interestin', if true." Buzzby licked his lips and smiled, and again there was silence, faintly broken here and there by the scrape of a booted foot as the crowd kept easing back to make room. Many of the women who had been dancing or lining the long bar to wheedle men into buying drinks had already turned and noiselessly scooted away to safer spots. They knew, as did the men, that it would not be long now.

Bull Buzzby spoke again. This time there was a mocking sneer on his face. "If yuh had let Slick Dick live we mighta settled this thing with no loss of time, pardner. As it is—well, hell, I ain't payin' out my good money just 'cause some stranger kills a gambler at one of my tables, then rises to make his demand."

As he spoke his hands had dropped as if carelessly from the bottle and the glass. They were now planked on the bar-long drain-trough. Beneath that trough, on an equally long shelf placed there for them, lay a row of six-shooters and pistols, all loaded and so carefully spaced a man might drop his hand anywhere along the bar and have it fall upon the butt of a weapon to be whipped instantly into action, its victim never knowing death was coming to him until a sudden roar filled the room and a bullet sent him crashing to the floor.

It was a woman who made Buzzby change his mind. She was a tall, dark creature who suddenly deserted a big, black-bearded buffalo hunter at a table against the wall and hurried across the room, her face startlingly white. She grabbed the hand-rail of the bar, throwing herself between Buzzby and the stranger as she leaned forward. Her words were intended for a whisper, but they came as a sharp hiss that carried all over the room and fell plainly into every already cocked ear:

"Go easy, honey! Buffalo Frank just told me that man is Captain Jesse Blood—from Hell Valley!"

Chapter II

MAN'S ONLY LAW

"NOW of course if yuh had made yourself known, sir, it would have never happened. Not in any place I run. I may be called a hard man by some, but God shore knows I'm right honest."

No one had ever seen Bull Buzzby in such

a bowing and catering mood. He barked at the lean and smirking little Mr. Ira Proud, his banker, to come hustling forward with the money, every dollar of it in gold, and hastily counted out, and sacked on a nearby table.

"The trouble was," he was still bowing, "is that yuh ain't in uniform. I'm allus nice to Army gents, an' if yuh had on your captain's suit—"

"Only I haven't, Mr. Buzzby." Jesse Blood could grin at him now as he shouldered the stout canvas bags and started pushing his way through the crowd toward the big front doorway. "I am Jesse Blood from Hell Valley, and I used to command the troops there, but it so happens that I resigned a couple of weeks ago and am no longer connected with the United States Army in any manner whatever. Thanks for the quick pay-off, and I'm sorry I had that slight trouble with one of your gamblers."

"Yuh—yuh ain't in the Army no more!" The words came out of Bull Buzzby in a series of grunts. His face had gone white, then purple, red beard and hair standing out more flame-like than ever. "Gawd A'mighty, if that's true, then—then I've been jokered into this! Where the hell's that damned black-skinned Mississippi Sally an' Buffalo Frank Jackson?" He wheeled this way and that, glaring all over the room. "Somebody is goin' to pay for doin' this to me!"

Blood had moved right on, ignoring him. The dark-skinned Mississippi Sally and the overgrown Buffalo Frank were keeping out of sight as they dropped behind the crowd and made a quick get-away through a side door.

With no one else left to curse and bully for the moment, Buzzby turned his ungovernable fire upon Ira Proud.

"But how was I to know?" the little banker wailed. "Hell Valley, they tell me is a good hundred and fifty miles down the river. I passed through it, I suppose, on the steamboat that brought me here two years ago, but we must have come through during the night or in the morning before noon when I was asleep. I've heard of Captain Blood—"

"Git outa my sight before I kill you!" roared Buzzby, whipping the table between them to hurl it smashing against the wall and sending the little banker fleeing like a startled mouse. "Damn it to hell, all I ever get out of anybody around here is a barrel full of excuses!"

He strode back to the poker table now, anger knowing no bounds. With one swift kick he sent the chair flying from under the dead man. Slick Dudley's body came backward in a loose flop that sprawled itself flat on the floor, arms thrown out like a wide V toward the front door, a flutter of cards flying from the sleeves.

Bull Buzzby was making a good show of it,

knowing that all eyes were on him. After a swift kick to the dead man's ribs he stepped astride of the body and picked up the fine beaver hat. He dug a big fist into it and swore.

"Hell!" he roared, spilling card after card from inside the hat and letting it fall to the floor. "Hell, what a hat! The damned thing has a double linin' an' was stuffed full! No wonder that fool shot 'im!"

"I run an honest house!" He glared at the crowd as if seeking at least a flicker of confirmation from somebody. "'Honest Buster Buzzby.'" That's what they used to call me back in Kentucky. Nobody called me 'Bull' in them days. No, sir! Honest Buster, it was. Belly up to the bar—all yuh squirts. The house is buyin' a round of drinks. I'll show yuh how big a sport I can be."

"Pinky Smith, Jerk White," he stopped half-way to the bar and glared at two lean, red-eyed gunmen in the crowd, "yuh two drag this carcass in the side room an' mop up the floor, then buzz outa here an' get a couple of flunkies from down on the wharf to dig another grave on the south slope. The sight of even a dead crook makes me sick at the belly. Well," he roared again, "get movin'!"

HE TRIED to be agreeable after that, ordering up two rounds of drinks instead of one, but he had been tricked and knew that there had to be some way to get even. A sensible man operating a dive like this would do his best to seek the slightest advantage he might gain over an officer of any standing in the Army. The Army was about the only law one had to think about on this wild frontier. Soldiers sometimes fell on places like this and burned them to the ground—and there were times when a commanding officer of a couple of troops of cavalry could order the owner of such a dive hauled out and shot as a menace to the settlement of the West.

An officer who would take money, and often with even the excuse of having won it in a gambling game, was a man usually handled, shaped and forced to do as he was told.

Bull Buzzby had simply made one wild leap at the chance to whip Captain Jesse Blood into his hands. Hell Valley was more than one hundred and fifty miles down the river. It had been one of the toughest holes along the Missouri, and Blood, young and full of fire, had come in to take command and rid that part of the frontier of its rampant vice. Old dives with all kinds of political pull had been shut down. Gamblers and divekeepers had been scattered and sent scurrying for other and safer parts. A powerful clique had been shattered, self-appointed judges and lawyers sent fleeing with the rest, peace made with surrounding tribes of Indians. For the first time settlers were welcomed into the valley.

In less than two years everyone along the Missouri had learned to respect the name of Captain Jesse Blood. Settlers who came through Paint Rock Bluffs swore by him. It was the same with many buffalo hunters, traders and trappers, Indian scouts and professional rivermen. To them Captain Blood was a man to ride the river with.

"Kinda funny 'bout that fella Blood." Buzzby cocked his ears when a lanky, hatchet-faced and thinly gray-bearded man in shoddy old buckskins started to speak. "He's like a heap of 'em. High flier for a little while, an' then all of a sudden he's flyin' low."

"An' what," Buzzby quickly moved closer, "could yuh be meanin' by that remark, mister?"

"Nothin', jes kinda thinkin' out loud." The lean one grinned. "I'm from Hell Valley, yuh sec. Name is Lige Fallon. Couple of years ago Blood told me to git my walkin' papers an' git. I went back just a couple of days 'fore that wagon train out there come through an' just in time, yuh might say, to see 'im kicked to clean hell an' gone outa the damn Army."

"A—a kick-out!" Bull Buzzby's mouth flew open. "Blood!"

"Well," Lige Fallon glanced half-cautiously to the right and left, "folks was sayin' it was as good as that, his messin' up with fellas sent out by Washington an' tryin' to boss 'em around. Me, now, I had a good Army scoutin' job an' was drawin' my money. General Crook left me in the valley—"

"Damn General Crook!" Bull Buzzby jarred the bar with a blow of his fist. "Stick straight to yore tale. Just how'd Jesse Blood got kicked outa the Army?"

"Cap'n Blood didn't get kicked out!" The answer came from a big, square-jawed Missourian of fifty, dressed in homespun blue jeans just to Lige Fallon's right. "I'm Matt Hawk from the Ozarks, sorter called captain of that wagon-train out back, an' I know what I'm sayin'. Jesse Blood got tired of the load of dishonest politicians Washington sent west an' upped an' resigned. He—Uh!"

The grunt and the sound of the blow came at the same time. Buzzby had taken one side-stepping pace that had carried him facing Fallon to squarely in front of Matt Hawk. Without a word, a big red fist had smashed upward. It had caught the Missourian flat on the point of the chin, and he was suddenly going backward and down.

"An' yuh, now," Buzzby wheeled back to Fallon with a scowl on one side of his face, a grin on the other, "yuh was speakin' of this Blood fella. Yuh said he was as good as kicked out."

"I—I only know," there was a quaver in Lige Fallon's tone now, his bullet-like blue

eyes watching that big red fist, his face having gone sickly yellow, "just what a lot of the folks was sayin'. They said Blood didn't quit just 'cause he wanted to quit. They said he *had* to resign."

"An' what then?" Buzzby was leaning forward, the unconscious man on the floor and the rest of the crowd apparently forgotten for the moment. "How'd he come to be with that wagon train out yonder in back an' strung up an' down the spring-branch?"

"He—he just come, I reckon." Fallon was pushing his way back into a safe distance in the crowd, bullet eyes still on that wicked fist. "Last night I heard some talk at the fire at the head of the train. Blood was sayin' then that the land 'round Paint Book Bluffs was free for the takin', right on the river, rich as the virgin grass, water for transportation, an' that it would be a nice place for them settlers to start throwin' up their new homes."

"Let a man try that on me!" Buzzby reached quickly for a bottle and a glass, jerking them to him. "Every hut that goes up will burn, an' every man, woman or child what tries to settle in my sight will burn with it. Go tell that damn Blood what I said! He ain't foolin' with a vote-hungry Washington crowd of pot-bellied an' public-fed hogs now. I'm the only law of man or god along this strip of the river—an', by Gawd, I'll kill 'im!"

Chapter III

POLECAT AROMA

JESSE BLOOD could smile inwardly as he walked back toward the train and his one huge wagon drawn by three yokes of stout oxen. He had money now for everything, and a dream that had been his for years would soon be unfolding itself. On his big freighter were all his worldly goods, including another three thousand dollars in gold and silver resting in an iron box inside the wagon.

The wagon also carried all the things a man would need to start a new home out here. There were tools for sawing the logs and getting up the house, hinges and wrought-iron latches for the doors, glass for the windows, pots and pans, kettles, spiders and ovens for the fireplace, and plows to turn the virgin sod in the new fields—some of it to be done before the fall of the first snow. And there were logs galore up the river that could be cut and floated down.

He had been through this country before, all the way up the Missouri to Fort Benton and on past that to the foot of the Rockies. There was plenty of fish in the river. At times the air was darkened by the flight of wild fowl, and the hills and valleys teemed with sage hens, antelope, deer and all manner

of smaller game. Buffalo herds still drifted across the benchlands in uncountable thousands, at times holding up steamboats for hours, for a single band to cross the river. No man could even think of going hungry in this country—and no man had to bother his head about the thought of a place to live. Montana Territory was long and broad, nearly one hundred and fifty thousands square miles of it—a wide, wild land with startling blue skies and rich land, almost free for the taking.

The tale of what had happened in Paint Rock Post had sped on ahead of him, and it took no wild guess to know who had carried it. He had seen the hard-hatted and loudly checked figure of one Mr. Melbern Randell standing near the front doors while Bull Buzzby was having the money counted out for him. Randell, rather short and stocky and somewhere in his middle thirties, would be the one to make a streak back to camp to give his own version of the affair—and especially to pour it into the ears of Nancy Hawk, the tall, red-haired wife of the train captain, and their daughter Annabell.

Randell was with the woman and the girl now, standing beside Matt Hawk's big old Conestoga wagon, the woman and the girl seated on the grass in front of him. Others had come up and were ganged around, the

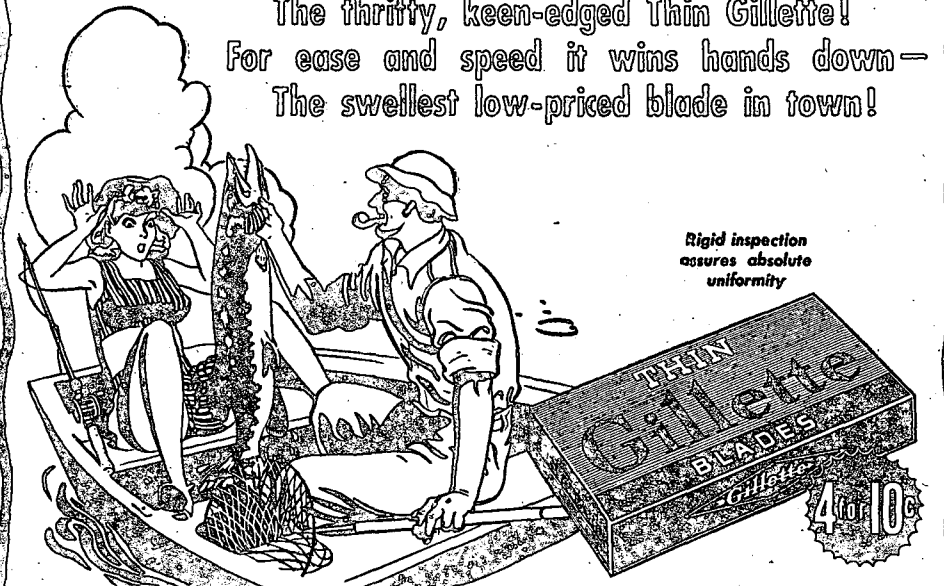
crowd growing, and eyes turned, staring as Blood approached, heading for his own wagon. Anger prickled through him when he noticed the satisfied little smirk on Randell's carefully shaven and powdered face.

It was going to be just one more mark to live down. Half of these people would not lift an eyebrow at the thought of a man deliberately shooting an Indian merely to see him roll off his pony. But it was a terrible thing when a white man was killed—even a crooked white gambler!

Nancy Hawk had disliked Blood from the beginning. She believed as did many others that he had been forced to resign from the Army or face a general court martial for some terrible crime. Some women liked to see the worst of everything especially with men like Melbern Randell to agree and tip his hat every ten seconds or jump to his feet like a stiff-legged cook when a good looking woman came within forty feet of him.

"Yeah, he's told it all." A lean, buck-skinned old man by the name of High-tower had sauntered up and was leaning against a front wheel when Blood reined his wagon fifty yards beyond the Hawks. "Spined his guts fast, as he would, an' of course to suit himself. Just nigh busted his neck gettin' here ahead of yuh, but I still don't think he's

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makin' as much headway with the gal as he was 'fore yuh come along. I see Matt acomin' now an' several stringin' along behind him."

Blood had left the saloon before Hawk was knocked cold on the floor, and had heard nothing about it, however it wasn't long before the rest of the camp was hearing the tale. It was one on which the ever-busy Randell had been scooped, but he was all ears and bright eyes when Matt Hawk, himself, told it:

"I just made a simple statement," he finished, "an' got knocked colder'n a dead duck for my pains. Not bein' too much of a fightin' man 'specially agin' such a crowd as that up there, I picked myself up when I could an' come on back where I belonged."

"You had no business up there in the first place!" Nancy Hawk was suddenly up from the grass and into him, her tongue as harsh as a buzzing rattler's tail. "Decent and respectable people never darken such doors, Matt Hawk!"

"I only went to see," Hawk was beginning to yell back at her. "Now don't you howl at me! Others went, Mr. Randell was there—"

"Only to glance in at the door!" she screamed. "Only to look at the evil way of men, the old whisky sots and the gamblers—like that cold-blooded Captain Blood standing over yonder at his wagon! Take your talk to him! There's fresh blood on his hands and evil on his brow. They sure found out that he didn't belong in the Army—and they kicked him out like a dirty dog!"

"Don't mind 'er, Cap'n Jesse!" Hawk turned now and headed straight for Blood's wagon. "Her tongue's as long as a fence rail. Why I ever let myself be talked into marryin' her after my Annabell's real maw died is more'n I can tell."

"Damn it all to hell!" He hit the ground with his hat. "Let's saddle up some stock an' go take a look at this land along the river. If there's enough folks who want to start our settlement here, then I'm for it, tooth an' tœ nail!"

"**YEP**, that's what they're gonna do." Lige Fallon took the news back to Bull Buzzby. "Blood's been for it all the time, an' now that Hawk's mad he'll swing the most of the crowd. Some few might go on. Some few might even turn back, but there won't be many. They've had a look at the land an' it makes 'em greedy. Makes yuh burn clear to the hollow, don't it?"

"Yuh maybe ain't as smart as yuh think, Mr. Fallon." Buzzby gave him a withering stare, but his voice was calm. "I'm a fella known far an' wide as one who can change his mind. Only fools won't change, an' maybe I'm sorter gonna like it for them folks to try to pitch up a settlement right here under my

nose. These mobs pourin' into the country and settlin' where they please like gangs of damn crows—well, they need a strong lesson. I've got friends who don't like to see settlements come, who don't like to see towns grow, the land turned over by the plow, the fish hauled out of the river, an' the game shot all over the hills an' up an' down the valleys.

"I knew about yuh, too." He leaned forward, eyes like those of a cat toying with a mouse. "Squawman in a right big way, cheap cut-throat an' rake, gun an' rum-runner but never with enough brains in yore knotty an' gourd-shaped head to run such things for yoreself. Yo're the kind what does all the low an' dirty work—an' get damn little of the money. Blood had yore number an' told yuh to get the quick an' far-gone outa Hell Valley. Maybe didn't have quite enough on yuh to stand yuh in front of a firin' squad. Yuh had some big Saint Louis jolly-whackers behind yuh, an' they had friends among the higher ups. Them saved yuh, maybe."

"Mr. Fallon," he leaned even closer, smiling now, "I'm a most understandin' man, 'specially when it comes to certain kinds of lice an' plain filth. Why, Mr. Fallon, yo're such a scummy, low-down, good for nothin' suck-egg hound that I may have right slick an' smart use for yuh in my string yet. Help yoreself to another little drink. The way yuh slop it down an' smack yore lips tells me yuh know it's free. Yuh would look more like a pain in the guts if yuh knowed yuh was gonna have to pay for it."

"Yuh—yuh talk damn mean to a man Mr. Buzzby."

"Only yuh ain't exactly a man, Fallon." Bull Buzzby's grin widened. "You're just a sort of two-legged polecat, even to the smell. I think I can use yuh. Fact is," he leaned back and cocked an eye toward the split-log ceiling, "I know I can. There are times when a right big stink comes in handy. Maybe yuh oughta gone into politics."

Chapter IV

FRONTIER HORSE-WHIPPING

MOST of them had come here for land, and they found land—rich and plentiful. The river was even better than a railroad right in their front doors. They could knock flatboats together and float with but little effort, all the way back to Missouri or on to the Gulf of Mexico without any of the usual hardships of the trail. And then there were the steamboats, due to run until the all-powerful railroad companies creeping into the country could squeeze them out of business by dropping their rates to next to nothing during the periods of high water, then lifting them out of sight again in

the long, warm months when the water was low.

Many of them had galloped up the river with Blood and Hawk in the lowering sunlight, and keen excitement had started its stirring in all of them. They had seen the great bend beginning a couple of miles above Paint Rock Bluffs, and there was little grumbling but a great deal of hasty plan-making when they returned to camp for long-delayed suppers, many of them not to sleep a wink for the rest of the night.

Never one to be left behind when there was a possibility of getting something for himself, Melbern Randell had been with the men, at times galloping on ahead and seeing everything. It was his long, six-bull wagon driven by an aged Negro called Banjo Joe that started the stampede at two o'clock in the morning. It suddenly began to lumber out of camp with Randell trotting alongside on his fine chestnut-sorrel to lay the whip to the cattle.

After that it was a general stampede, the rest of the stock hastily brought in, this wagon and that wagon getting out ahead of the other. Leading a spanking pair of black saddlers behind, Blood drove out at sunrise with wagons rumbling and swaying ahead of him, each hustling along to the crack of the whips and headed for some spot its owner had picked out for himself and his family the evening before. Leaving the driving to his wife and daughter, Matt Hawk dropped back on his big iron-gray when they were getting close to the rim of the bend.

"It's maybe fair, though I can't say it looks like it," he growled. "Tell a gang of people they can have somethin' for nothin' an' they go slap-dab hawg-wild. Even my Nancy was bootin' me with her knee long 'fore daylight an' wantin' me to start hustlin'. Hanged if I would do it. She was so hell set agin' it until she heard them wagons tearin' out. Reckon we'll get anything worth a dang, cap'n?"

"All we want and a thousand miles besides!" Blood laughed at him, long and yet untouched bullwhip swaying in its leather boot beside him. "There are only eighty-six of us to settle. At a section each, that's just a square mile to the settler. Less than ten square miles—and there's twice that much in the big basin in the bend."

They could see down a long, grassy slope and into the bend shortly after that. It was a mess for some of the wagons that had been rushed out before dawn. The worst was down a sharp-backed little ridge in the slope. Two giant wagons had their trouble, one driver trying to whip and yell past the other. Smashing into each other on that narrow rise, the one to the left had been turned over,

half the canvas top torn out and the yet cursing owner's belongings spilled through the ragged hole.

The wagon to the right had the worst of it by far. Turned over itself by that before-dawn crash, its tongue had snapped, freeing the oxen. The owner and his family had been thrown clear of the high seat, and the ponderous wagon looked as if it had turned over a dozen times, smashing things to bits and scattering them for rods down the steeper side of the slope toward the river.

Malbern Randell's big freighter was the next to catch and hold one's stare. It was not smashed at all, for it had made its way on down the slope without an apparent hitch from the careful handling by old Banjo Joe. A mile yet from a big, broad rise on the bank of the river it had run into trouble. The panting cattle had been driven across a bare spot of ground that looked like merely a patch of damp sand. A keener eye would have noticed the little rim of saw-grass around its edge, and a man who knew his West would have shunned it.

RANDELL'S cattle had crossed the spot, but it had been something else when it came to that long and heavy wagon. The wheels had bogged quickly, little bubbles of water coming up around them. Now the wagon sat buried to the bed, the old Negro helpless on the front seat, the three yokes of oxen standing out of all danger on the hard ground while Randell galloped here and there, trying to hire or bully other settlers to unhook the cattle from their wagons and help pull him out of a very mean bog-hole. He saw Blood and Hawk, but for some reason he came galloping on past Hawk as if he had not seen him and swung in beside Blood's wagon.

"I've got to have some help!" He had already shouted himself hoarse and his voice was one of those high-pitched shrieks. "I've been in that infernal hole for nearly three hours. I could kill that old fool for driving into it!"

"There's just a few certain things to do about it." Blood had delayed his answer until he pulled up about fifty feet west of the bogged wagon. "You've been worrying the devil out of your oxen, and oxen can't stand worrying and hurrying like teams of mules or horses. They'll drop in their tracks and die on you. The only thing you can do is to unload your wagon out the front and rear—"

"What?" Randell's eyes bugged. "Unload all my belongings and—and scatter them on the ground?"

"It's the only way," Blood nodded, holding his temper. "Unload, knock loose your bolster stakes and snake the bed off, then

you can cut your coupling pole and pry and snake out the running-gear a piece at a time. It's the only way I see for you to get out of there."

"But, damn it, enough cattle on ahead of mine will pull it out!"

"I doubt it, Mr. Randell." Blood shook his long jerk-line over the backs of his cattle and his big wagon started moving on. "They're more apt to break out your tongue and make a mess of it."

"Damned little I might have expected of you!" Randell wheeled away, galloping toward another wagon to try to bully and coax there. Blood chuckled to himself and kept on driving.

He now knew the place that Randell had been heading for. It was a big rise with the east toe of it sloping down into a flat, rock-covered finger thrust into the river. Blood had seen possibilities in that rise the afternoon before. A man could throw up a steamboat wharf on the south side of that finger poked out into the water. Being on the south side, those rocks would protect it from ice going out in the spring, and one could build a warehouse and a general store on the rise.

Heading on for the rise, he was nearing the foot of it when the fierce clatter of hoofs came to him. It was Randell, dashing up on his horse, tight seat pounding the saddle. Now he carried a Winchester and had become white-faced.

"I know where you think you're going, Blood!" he began. "That's my rise and I'm heading for it. I was heading for it when I bogged down. I'm going on to it now and stick up my marker. Don't try to mount that rise with this damned wagon unless—unless," he was getting out the rest of it in gasps, "you're prepared to fight!"

"Randell, you're getting too damned big for your pants." Blood reached for his long whip. "Last night it was you I heard spouting the rule of the first wagon to a site meant that it was taken by the owner of the wagon. The most of the crowd agreed with you, thinking we'd all roll out at the usual time. Being a cheap little rat you started the rush—"

"You call me—you call me that!" Randell looked as if he was suddenly going mad, hands crazily fondling that Winchester, a fool ready to start trying to shoot it out with a man who would be almost certain to kill him before it was done. "You—you white trash Army kick-out, I'll—"

And that was as far as he could get with it. Matt Hawk had seen the trouble coming and was galloping back to them his face having gone long and worried. The whip in Jesse Blood's hands was quicker. It slashed out, the long end of it winding and slapping

a good eight feet of itself around Randell. A fierce jerk snatched him out of the saddle, the big wagon drawing to a halt as Jesse Blood carried out a long "Oo—oo, boys!" to his oxen as he left the seat and hit the ground to take his surprised and struggling victim in hand.

"Now, Mr. Randell," Blood was so calm Matt Hawk afterwards swore that he could not believe he was angry at all, "I'm going to give you a little something your father and mother should have given you a whole hell of a lot of years ago. I'm going to give you an old-fashioned horse-whipping that'll keep your pants afire for a week."

They must have heard the yell of terror and pain for a mile up the river when the first stroke of four feet of the end of that long whip fell with Jesse Blood holding his victim flat on the ground with his booted left foot jammed solidly down on the back of his neck.

Melbern Randell fainted when the eleventh stroke struck, splitting the tight seat of his fine doeskin trousers from the crotch to the waistband as though a cavalry saber had landed a slashing cut back there. If he had expected sympathy or help in any manner from Matt Hawk he had not received it. Hawk had come charging up to bounce down off his horse, but he stood there only pop-eyed, waiting for the fury to spend itself.

"A N' now," Matt Hawk spoke at last, still staring at the limp thing on the ground, "I suspect that you're gonna have to shoot 'im before yuh hear the end of it. It's the completest whippin' an' the quickest I ever saw a man or mule get, but he'll shore be tryin' to get even—an' his kind do that from behind or go out an' hire somebody else to pass the hot lead for 'em.

"Most cantankerous cuss I ever saw, Jesse." He looked up with a little smirk. "I'll be damned if he ain't! My Annabell blowed loose on 'im last night just after he'd et his supper with us. It made Nancy madder'n cats, but Annabell told him what she thought of his high and mighty ways, an' today he ain't speakin' to none of us."

Blood had guessed that something was wrong, but he would not yet believe it was serious enough to last. Lean old Andy Hightower had said that Melbern Randell had been in the girl's shadow ever since Hawk's train had creaked out of Liberty, Missouri and he would be no man to easily forget such a pretty girl. Everyone knew that he claimed to be from Virginia, from a rich and powerful family back there, but there was something missing in that claim.

Old black Banjo Joe was the real claim. He was white-haired and sideburned, always

neat and polite; the perfect, before-the-war Virginia houseman even when cooking a meal beside a camp fire. No one could tell where or how Melbern Randell had picked him up. He seemed entirely out of place with Randell. He could get a smile from the most grouchy settler in the train, rain or shine, and when he brought out his old home-made banjo and perched himself on a rock or a log of firewood to pick and sing, he always drew a large crowd.

Knowing that everybody was watching him, and not wanting to have to take Randell in hand again when he came back to his senses, Blood climbed back on his wagon and drove on to the rise, giving his oxen time to rest in a couple of places as he mounted the slope.

A couple of surprises were in store for him here. In the center of the rise he saw a big spring bubbling out of a sandy bed and surrounded by rocks, shaggy old trees, and a swift little stream winding its way down the slope from it. This made the rise more important than ever, for he had expected to have to use river water until a well could be driven somewhere down near the edge of the stream.

The second surprise was even as great when he stopped his warm and blowing oxen several rods from the water. As he dropped off the seat and turned toward the rear of his wagon he saw Banjo Joe standing there. Always the churchly deacon, he stood with his hat in his hand, the big banjo, a bundle of worn bedding and an old white sack containing all the rest of his worldly possessions lying at his feet in the grass.

"I slipped up an' crawled on the back of yo' wagon, Cap'n Jesse," he explained. "I just cant stand workin' for Mr. Melbern no mo', not if I have to tie me a couple of logs together an' float 'way down the old river back to Virginia. If yo'all let me, I'll work an' do my best for you."

"And this will mean," Blood frowned, "that I'll have to kill him now. Why the devil did you have to pick on me, Joe?"

"You's mo' like my own folks used to be, Cap'n Jesse." The old Negro lifted his head and looked at him steadily. "I'm afraid to go to the others. They might not stand up for me when Mr. Melbern comes to order me back to him. I knows you will if you once say I can stay with you. I'm awful easy on my wearin' clothes, Cap'n Jesse. I won't cost much an' I can still cook an' take care of a house."

Blood frowned again and turned to look on past him and down where Randell's big wagon sat in the bog-hole with a few men now gathering around it. He could see Randell, not waving his hands and giving orders

now but standing rather dejectedly to one side until he turned and looked at the rise. Now he lifted his fist and shook it and seemed to dance a few steps of a jig. Blood turned and looked at Banjo Joe, and there was a queer little glint in his eyes when he spoke.

"I stopped the wagon here to let the cattle cool before going on to the water. Guess we'd better water the horses, Joe, and then we'll take a turn at seeing what we can do to get our first camp pitched. Later in the day I'll swim one of my horses across the river and see if I can't shoot us a few sage hens for supper. Should be a lot of them and antelope as well over there on the benches and up the draws."

"Not right now, Cap'n Jesse!" Banjo Joe had suddenly grabbed him by the arm and was pointing up the river. "Not with them kind of folkses around to scare them away!"

Blood looked, frowned, then swore under his breath. On the rim of a towering benchland a mile up the other side of the river a long row of figures mounted on a colorful array of ponies had appeared and were standing still and staring down into the basin. In the middle of the row, mounted on a splendid red and white spotted horse, was a rider that seemed almost a foot taller than the others. On his head was a great war-bonnet that branded him as the chief of those sixty-odd ponymen.

Indians were already looking down on another new settlement about to start taking shape in the middle of their fine hunting lands, and it was a certainty that there was not a red on the rim who did not hate the sight of it.

It would have looked worse if Jesse Blood had known that the chief of that big band of bucks was a friend of Bull Buzzby, until now the undisputed king of this section of the Missouri.

Chapter V

TWO HEARTS IN TUNE

IT WAS the first warning of real trouble, coming just when the train was scattered all over and most of the settlers not yet having had time to remove their belongings from the wagons. Blood hastily took a big telescope off his wagon seat and spent about five minutes studying the line-up on that high rim.

All army man once more now, he could see that about every tribe of Indians in the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana—and even a great portion of the Southwest—were represented in that band. That in itself meant trouble. Washington's high-handed policy

of late was bringing more trouble, just as they always managed to send it flaming over the frontier from the padded swivel-chairs and smug offices. Government agents who knew as much about Indians as a hog would know about a side saddle, were passing out the rules. Redskins were being herded into supposed reservations and fearless fighting men told to sit on their haunches and wait for the Great White Father to send them weekly rations of beef and clothing, all free from the taxpayers' pockets.

Out of whose great and wonderful brain this fool idea had come was a question no sensible frontiersman could understand. Some of the Indians, especially the old and the shiftless, had again patiently tried to listen to the wonders that were to be done for them, only to learn that beef and clothing came to them in jerks and dribbles that were not near enough to go around. Many of the young and fearless were quitting the reservations in groups and joining with others in the hills, their hatred for the whites made fiercer by swarms of buffalo hunters now pouring into the country to kill off the great herds and make the growing starvation all the keener.

It was one reason that Jesse Blood had grown sick of the Army and the political strings attached to it.

The redskin up there in the huge war-bonnet was the most interesting. His size and his fine horse made him appear to sit head and ears above the rest of them—a bold, arrogant Sioux chief. If Jesse Blood could guess at all, that proud buck would be Long Wolf, already becoming known as the terror to far settlements, a cunning, near-mythical fighting man, who struck with all the unexpected shock of chain-lightning from clear skies, then vanished back into the hills without leaving a trace of the trail of his coming or going.

"They's—they's goin' away, Cap'n Jesse." Banjo Joe spoke, his voice low with awe. "Jest lak they come."

It was true. As silently as they had appeared, the band was turning back from the rim. There was no hurrying, no whirling and kicking the ribs of their ponies to stir up even a banner of dust. It was all arrogance in itself, just as if an unspoken ultimatum had been sent down from the skyline and the next move would be up to the settlers to either clear out of the basin or die.

"Here come Mr. Hawk an' his Miss Annabell." Banjo Joe, was speaking in that low, almost reverent voice again. "Guess they's purty bad scared too, Cap'n Jesse."

IT WAS Melbern Randell's chance when he saw Matt Hawk and his daughter ride toward the rise from their big wagon slight-

ly more than a mile away. He had seen the Indians up there, the sight stirring his blood and making him stand and stare with open-mouthed amazement as did all the others.

He had finally wheedled Lige Fallon and a big, low-browed and black-bearded settler called Tubby McBride to get his wagon out of the hole. Fallon had been honey-sweet in his sympathy. McBride had sucked at his short and stubby pipe and nodded his agreement. A born gentleman, Fallon pointed out, was rarely a match for a born ruffian, a course-handed hellion who would always take brutal advantage over his fellowman. He had known exactly what to say.

"Out here we just wait, Mr. Randell," he had smirked. "Yore time will come, I know, an' maybe in the end yuh won't have to dirty yore fine hands with the likes of Jesse Blood. Ever'body knows yuh didn't have a chance, knocked off yore saddle by the butt of a whipstock when yuh was only tryin' to reason with 'im. I saw the whole thing from start to finish, an' folks will understand an' be on yore side if yo'll just wait. I'll shore tell 'em what I saw."

Really anxious for some excuse, Melbern Randell had agreed with him, the low-browed and big-bellied Tubby McBride adding a few grunts and nods of his own approval. Now, with Fallon and McBride left to get the wagon back on solid ground, he slipped down a dark raincape from his saddle and threw it around his shoulders, then headed straight for Matt Hawk's wagon to right another mistake.

Nancy Hawk was just trying to get out of the rear end of the wagon when he rode up. One might have called it a natural thing for her to be having a world of womanly trouble with her long skirts in getting down over the high tail-gate and the short stub of the stout end of the coupling-pole. She had been caught there, high and astride of the gate, the left side of her skirts ripped almost to the waist. He was just in time to swing in close and slip a quick forearm under her knee to help her on over, then very gently he eased her down to the ground.

Perhaps it had never occurred to him that Nancy Hawk was a remarkably good looking woman until that moment, but of course, he had never seen her caught astride of a tail-gate. She still had the figure of a tall, shapely girl of twenty. Even the trail had not been allowed to mar the flawlessness of her smooth, fair face, the cheeks flushed as she stood there gripping the torn skirts to her, big blue eyes sparkling, the dark-red hair now glorious in the sunlight.

"I came over," he told her with something like a frog in his throat as he dismounted, hat in hand, "to make amends for last night.

I was most naturally upset, seeing a man murdered in cold blood in the afternoon, then the excitement of seeing this basin and knowing we were going to settle here. I pulled out early, hoping to get a choice location for Mr. Hawk as well as myself. Perhaps I did say things I shouldn't have said about Captain Blood, but I'm sure you saw or heard what happened to me a short time ago. In my embarrassment you will notice that I'm wearing my raincape in spite of the warmth of the morning. I came over to apologize—"

"Only," she cut in with a strangely teasing smile, "you don't have to apologize, Melbern." It was the only time she had called him by his first name and she seemed to wait for a couple of seconds for the full force of it to strike him. "You were the gentleman, and Annabell the silly young fool as usual. What real, worldly men like you can see in these empty-headed girls is more than I know. She's twenty, but she'll be fifty years old before she has a lick of sense, if she has any then. I'm just thirty-three. If I had had more sense at the time, I wouldn't have married Matt Hawk when I was seventeen—but even if I have to say it—I have more sense than Annabell will have at forty."

"And just why, Nancy," he was keeping his distance but slowly looking her up and down, "did a woman like you marry such an ignorant man? You have sense, good breeding—"

"My father was a lawyer." She leaned back against the tailgate and gave him another one of those fascinating smiles. "A small town lawyer but a good one, and I was the only child. If it hadn't been for money he gave me all along until he died—well, Annabell might have starved. We made this trip out here mostly on the money my father left me. I still have four thousand dollars in gold in this old wagon, but I've about decided that I've spent all I want to spend on Matt Hawk and his daughter. My better bringing up calls for—for—"

"Intelligent companionship!" He finished it for her, and then stood there staring at her like a fool. He had never expected anything like this; it had as good as swept him off his feet, leaving him cold and dry-voiced, and for a long minute they stood as if lost in their thoughts, Jesse Blood and even the Indians forgotten.

Melbern Randell had always been a ruthless man and always on the move from one adventure to another. Virginia had held him for only fifteen months, having come there from New Orleans where a ship had carried him from Baltimore in the first place. He rarely talked of the other places, and never except when sure of his company. It was time here for a little straight talk, now that the shock was wearing down and this good looking woman still smiling.

"You might know why I wanted to make peace." He could turn on the pressure once started, and a glance toward the rise and a thought of the Indians helped. "I thought of only you when I saw those Indians, Nancy. I thought of you and held myself when Blood knocked me off my horse with the butt of his whip. It was a foul blow. I wasn't looking at him. I was only pleading with him for a little help—"

"But all the time you have been hanging around our wagon," she cut in, ready to force the issue herself, "it has been to see and talk to our dear little Annabell! It's strange that you could never look at me so searchingly until you came along to help me out of the wagon. I wonder if my gold could have anything to do with it, Melbern?"

"Good God, Nancy!" His eyes were big, looking as startled as all thunder. "Could—could you be so hellishly blind as to not realize that my heart hasn't always been aching and pining for you? Damn it, Nancy, you are another man's wife! I—I was just afraid to let you know. But—but," he seemed to choke, "we understand at last?"

"At last," she nodded. "Even smart men

SMART WOMEN WEAR TREDs



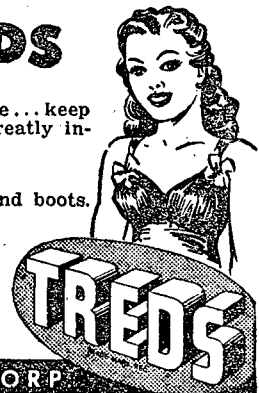
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can be slow and stupid when it comes to a woman, Melbern. Better get back to your wagon. I see they're getting it out of the hole. Come back for supper and let me do the most of the talking. I'll have things in complete harmony here—or burst a skillet filled with hot grease over Matt Hawk's thick head."

Chapter VI

BLOODY GOLD

EVEN with the Indians gone, the excitement among most of the settlers held on. Many of the scattered wagons had soon been rolling back together and ganging up, their owners anxious-eyed, their women and children expecting the worst. Terror gripped them in a dozen places about three hours before sunset. Many men grabbed their rifles, listening to the stab-like report of a gun on the other side of the river.

"It's Cap'n Blood!" Matt Hawk sent the yell going the rounds. "He went over to shoot some game for his supper!"

After that it was quieter, though there was grumbling here and there about a man being so thoughtless as to scare the devil out of everybody. When night fell and a campfire burned on the rise the women and children settled down and were soon turning into their beds, but many men slept restlessly, sitting up from time to time with their guns beside them, their eyes searching the surrounding rims in the moonlit night.

Within a week the Indians were as good as forgotten, and many men and their families were looking upon Lige Fallon and Mr. Melbern Randell as the most helpful pair in the beginning work of the new settlement. Lige Fallon had really blossomed out. He wore a new white hat that had cost him at least fifty dollars. The spanking-new suit of pale yellow buckskins on him were beaded and fringed with the finest of Indian work. He had new boots, his hair had been cut, his beard trimmed.

Jesse Blood, quietly taking stock of it all now and then through his telescope from the distance, had never seen Lige Fallon looking so well and prosperous. He had always looked more like a lean, half-starved wolf with a good start of mange growing on him, to say nothing of an odor about him that kept a man with a sensitive nose away from him. He had moved down close to Randell, and they seemed to be hitting it off well enough together.

"And neither one," Blood had told the gentle Banjo Joe, "appears to be interested in much more than getting a rude camp pitched. Maybe Matt Hawk was right when

he said Randell's waiting until he can hire somebody to do the heavy work for him."

Hawk and his daughter were dropping over every day, both wanting to ask questions. Everybody outside of Randell was busy. Fallon was constantly on the go from one wagon camp to another, to tell people how this and that should be done and show them the best places to start throwing up their houses. He took his meals with Tubby McBride and his family, and Randell had gone back to eat at Hawk's wagon, as brazenly as though nothing had happened. Many probably did note that he usually arrived late in the morning after Hawk and his Annabell had taken yokes of oxen and axes up the river to cut and snake down logs to the water's edge for their new house.

Jesse Blood had but little time to watch his neighbors. Banjo Joe spent most of his time taking care of the camp, the horses and the extra cattle, and Randell was letting the old fellow alone. A man on the go from dawn until dark, Blood was silently setting an example for many of the others. On the fourth day at dawn he had taken Banjo Joe along with him, and in the middle of the afternoon the first big raft of logs warped together with chain and rope had come floating down the river to be landed against the rocky toe while the old Negro trudged back along the bank with four yokes of tired oxen.

Back-breaking work had produced the first logs for the walls of Matt Hawk's and Jesse Blood's cabins, and there was enough timber on the rise to be cut and split to support their heavy sod roofs. A new settlement under the western sky was gradually beginning to take shape!

"HE'S A hustler, no mistake." Lige Fallon was again making his nightly report, and this time—as in several nights past—he was making it in the sanctuary of one of Bull Buzzby's fine upstairs rooms overlooking the river. "Our good friend—now plain Mister Blood—sent around the news that he's offerin' two hundred dollars as a prize for a nice an' maybe big-soundin' name for the settlement."

"An' Matt Hawk's gal will get it, of course!" Buzzby chuckled. "They seem to be hittin' it off fine from all the reports."

"She liked 'im from the start." Lige Fallon took his drink, and then—even to Bull Buzzby's surprise—he dabbed at his lips with a perfectly clean white handkerchief. "Everbody could see it but Mr. Randell, I reckon. But I guess she'll take her chances with the rest on the prize money. It's said that it's gonna be left up to a vote of the whole crowd as to what name best suits. He'll lean clear hell back'ards to play square, and that's what makes so many fools lean to him, Bull."

"Look now, Fallon." The owner of Paint Rock Post leaned forward, eyes two hard little yellow jewels in the lamplight. "Mark this time just what yuh hear. This'll make twice in a row that I've told yuh I ain't exactly hawg-wild about that name of *Bull*, though I take it from some with a smile—"

"But—but, good Gawd, man, we're friends!"

"*I ain't got no friends.*" Buzzby's words were low but as hard as hammers. "*I ain't wantin' no friends.* Men I know are just folks I use or folks who try to use me. I passed the word downstairs that yuh was to have some credit in the store an' at the bar, an' yuh made quick an' fine use of it, even tryin' to extend it to the percent gals on the dance floor—"

"But—but I paid cash for my suit!"

"An' charged hat an' boots, drawers an' shirts to me, sayin' nothin' of some socks, a couple of boxes of cartridges, chawin' an' smokin' tobacco—an' four or five dollars at the bar ever'time yuh come. The money yuh gimme had a dead man's blood on it."

"Why—why, I—I—"

"Don't choke yoreself, *Mister Fallon.*" Bull Buzzby's tone was as gentle as whispering wind. "Yuh knowed Mr. Randell in Saint Louis a couple of years ago, though he was callin' 'imself Rogers Clemmens then. It was plum natural for yuh an' him to fall back together when that wagon train come through Hell Valley, though yuh two ain't thought it safe to appear chummy until now. Yuh pulled out of Hell Valley with the train. It made only seven miles the first day, an' that night yuh slipped back an' killed an' robbed a fella in a little general store. His name was Pop Powderly. That is," he smiled, "yuh done the killin' while yore friend held the horses at a safe distance. Yuh was back in the wagon camp next mornin' with out anybody there knowin' yuh was gone. Now ain't that right?"

"Good—Gawd!" Lige Fallon was really choking now. "How—how'n hell do yuh know all that?"

"I know all, see all, hear all." Bull Buzzby was really enjoying himself. "Maybe there was a couple of Indians lyin' in the bushes that night, waitin' to buy guns from Pop Powderly when it was safe enough for them to scratch on the back door."

"But, anyway," he shrugged, "no Indian told me that Randell's gonna steal off with Matt Hawk's wife an' four thousand dollars in gold he's got on that wagon. Randell told that, 'imself, to one of my gals when yuh two was up here last night. I ain't puttin' no stumblin' block in his way, but I am gonna see 'im tonight 'fore yuh two sneak back to that new settlement just 'fore dawn. He's

back there with our golden-haired little Texas Julia with the china-blue eyes right now."

"Yuh—yuh win, Bull—er—I mean Mister Buzzby!"

"I most generally win." Buzzby took time to pour drinks for them both. "Come Sunday, three days from now, will come that batch of poor Indians down the river. Nary gun an' nary buck among 'em what looks like there's a fight left in 'im. A lot of these little bands on their last legs will work for a white man. Yo'll see that they'll dig in to help them settlers get up their houses. It'll hurt 'em to have to stoop to such things, but they'll do it, workin' like hell until Tuesday night, an' then yuh an' Mr. Randell will see that they've suddenly got guns an' ammunition. Randell's whole damn wagon's loaded with firearms, enough to take ever'body by surprise an' make way for a bigger bunch to sweep in an' wipe an' burn out that whole raess before yore Jesse Blood can tip his hat."

"But of course, *Mister Fallon,*" he sipped his drink, eyes two sharp and piercingly bright little tacks, "no money will burn. Gold is gold where you find it. And of course I can still use you and your dear good friend Mr. Randell. I'm big-hearted. I'll let him keep his new woman or swap 'im Texas Julia for her, if he's so damn crazy about 'er. We use good-lookers here in our business. They shore make damn fools of men! Go on an' gulp yore drink. Don't yuh like 'my free whisky any more?"

Chapter VII

WHITE MAN'S TRICKERY

SUNDAY saw them coming, right on time, though there were only two men in the settlement who knew the exact hour to expect them. This was white-man-work, not Indian; this was far-planning and far-execution. The one glaring mistake of the Indian was to never change his methods. Even Jesse Blood—having been on the frontier for almost ten years—would not have been able to recall a single time when Indians sent old men and squaws into a camp ahead of a general attack. Indians came almost invariably just before dawn, striking in force with hellish yells and the growing thunder of the ponies sweeping to the attack, shunning many of the ways of the fork-tongued things that crawled through the grass on their gliding bellies on the ground.

And this bunch was enough to take any man off his guard. There were about thirty old bucks and the rest squaws. Six of the oldest carried bows and arrows, a few more lances—weapons the younger men of all the

tribes had long ago flung away for the good rifles and occasional six-shooters obtained from renegade whites stealing quietly through the hills and valleys in wagons, or landing innocent-looking flatboats here and there in lonely spots on the river and up the byways with guns, ammunition and Indian whiskey for trade at ungodly profits to be taken in fur, the finest buffalo robes, buckskin chewed and tanned under water until it was as soft as cotton, thoroughly waterproof and as strong as seasoned wood—and sometimes gold and silver, the most of it stolen in terrible and bloody foray.

This band, by all appearance, was one of those hopeless lots—bucks and squaws no longer having the strength and courage to keep up with their ever-shifting and fighting tribes. They were Crows, Cheyennes, Sioux, Tongues, and half the rest of the breeds. All were ragged and filthy, several plodding along on crooked sticks cut from the forests—and the last one hungry and on the beg, ready to snatch any scrap of food tossed to them like a bad bone to a cur and wolf it down without bothering to knock the dust from it as it fell at their feet.

Jesse Blood, Matt Hawk and Annabell saw them for the first time about two hours before the sun dropped behind the hills and the long twilight started slowly closing in. They had brought down another huge raft of logs and poles—this time for their barns and their first corrals—with Banjo Joe driving the oxen along the bank.

"Beats clear hell, don't it!" Hawk was startled after they had made the raft fast against the toe and had mounted the rise. "Gawd A'mighty, Jesse, they've pitched 'emself a sort of a camp of their own right in the middle of the settlement."

"Nearer, I'd say," Blood corrected, "to the eastern edge of it. They seem to hug within a couple of hundred yards of Mr. Melbern Randell and our most busy Mr. Fallon. It's no strange sight, these bands of old and broken reds drifting from place to place, but—look!—I'll swear some of them seem to be actually working!"

"And one, at least, for us!" The girl lifted a hand to point. "An Indian is bringing up our extra oxen and the horses, Dad!"

"Yes," Blood nodded soberly, "and a squaw or two seems to be helping Mrs. Hawk with something around the wagon."

"An'," Hawk looked at him sharply, "yuh don't like it?"

"No, I don't—exactly." Blood frowned. "I suppose, though, we'd better let well enough alone by keeping our mouths shut for a time. They're here and seem to already have a strong set-in. Indians like that will beg, but I'm hanged if they're not far and few

who'll work. Look at that pair down there helping Tubby McBride roll up that log! Indians are not born for that kind of a thing. If it's to be done, then it's work for the squaw, not the buck. For thousands of years he has been the hunter and the fighter. Age and hunger will not change him."

"Then, by grab," Hawk set his jaw, "I'm goin' on to my wagon an' run them to hell away from it. I'll tell 'em to get. Still, though," he was suddenly undecided and rubbing his jaw nervously, "my Nancy's a long-headed woman. Maybe she's fed 'em an' makin' 'em pay for it. She'd only lay me out with her tongue—probably."

"In other words," the girl was setting her jaw now, "Dad isn't afraid of her, he's just a cautious man."

They laughed and soon were parting. Hawk carried away half the carcass of an antelope Blood had shot, dressed and salted the evening before. Now it was up to Blood to pacify Banjo Joe and get the old fellow to work preparing the evening meal. Banjo Joe had to have the last word.

"But—but even the horses snort when they see 'em an' smell 'em from clear off down there!"

"And Indian horses and ponies snort and paw when they see and smell a white man, Uncle Joe." Blood laughed at him. "You could whip any two of them with one hand."

"I'd use both, an' feet an' guns all three if they cotched me!" Joe grinned nervously. "But I'm sayin' now, Cap'n Jesse, they'd sho' my Lawd have a foot-race on their hands an' on their minds. Look!" He jerked up a long black hand. "Heah come a woman an' two mens now! Cap'n Jesse, *what we gonna do?*"

"Give them the rest of that six-point buck I shot Saturday afternoon and send them back to the others."

He was gentle enough but firm when they came up. The squaw was a Pawnee, one of the bucks a Cheyenne, the other a Crow. He had never seen a more evil-looking woman. She still looked as big and strong as a buffalo cow, a flat-faced and ungodly filthy thing with her left eye hacked away by a long scar deeply driven in the left side of her temple and raking all the way down to the point of her chin. Banjo Joe looked as if he was going to faint when she turned her glittering good eye upon him, its depths the dark and smouldering pit of a tiny volcano. She spoke to Blood:

"Grub. Indian hungry. Indian starve. No tribe. Tribe bad. We old. No good fight. Indian hungry."

"Indian work." The Cheyenne stepped forward. "Work pay meat. No gun, no bow arrow." He opened his hand empty, Blood studying every move. "Indian old."

"You look you come far." Blood answered him. "Boston man no need woman to build fire. Take meat." He pointed to the rest of the buck hanging on a limb with a sack loosely around it. "Indian go cook own meat, back to place below."

"Indian camp here," began the squaw, switching herself to Chinook. "Indian word good—"

"No!" Blood said firmly. "Take meat. Go! No come back when dark. Black man bad. Black man shoot. No see black man in dark. Him devil. Kill many Indians. Him Evil Eye. Cast spell. Sometime," he added, suppressing a smile, "*Him! Eat! Indian!*"

"Lawd, Cap'n Jesse, what'd you tell that scared 'em?"

"That you eat Indians." Blood could laugh when that evil-looking trio had gone back down the slope with the squaw carrying the venison. "I told them a lot of things. But I didn't scare them, Uncle Joe. Not on your life! That squaw's so tough a rattlesnake couldn't mark her hide, and if he did he would only crawl off and die. Until that bunch leave we're sticking close to camp and getting some of our logs up. In the meantime we'll keep both eyes peeled and keep our powder dry."

"WAKE, Cap'n Jesse. Wake. Somebody's runnin' to'd the rise."

Tuesday had come and was gone without a hitch. It was close to two o'clock Wednesday morning when that trembling black hand and Banjo Joe's husky whispers aroused him. They had put up the walls of their cabin. No more than half the wide chinks were yet filled, but a big square of canvas had been stretched over the top and the most of the wagon unloaded.

Jesse Blood had done the most of the work. Always the wary wolf, he had liked the looks of things in the basin less and less despite all the signs of peace. Another little band of ragged Indians had straggled in, and two bands of Indians coming along perfectly willing to work like mules for their food and a few scraps of old clothing was something that a man just did not see.

Because he was scared—and Blood had made it a point to keep him on edge—Banjo Joe had been spared the work in order to sit

up in the shadows and keep sharp old eyes on the basin at night.

The moon was low now and there was a hazy murk in the sky when—cramming in his shirt tail and buckling on his six-shooters—Blood followed the old man outside. The land lay as still as death, then, after a short wait, gravel rolled on the west side of the slope, and Banjo Joe grabbed his master's arm in a grip that made him wince.

"Dar, Cap'n Jesse!" he hissed. "*Dar!*"

And then Blood saw her, scrambling toward him, her eyes big and wild even in the dim light and her face as colorless as a sheet. In a moment, panting furiously, unable to speak for moments, she was to him, wildly flying hands grasping him by the unbuttoned front of his stout woolen shirt her head going to his bosom, and her mouth gnawing at him to hold back the sobs. He put his arms around her.

"Jesse!" Words were finally coming. "He's dead! I know he's—he's dead! I—I can't hear him breathe!"

"Watch everything, front and back, Joe." Blood gave the order calmly, then lifted one hand to roll the girl's head back so that he could look down into that terror-stricken face. "Take it easy, Anna—darling. There's plenty of time—"

"It was her—my step-mother!" She wheeled in his arms, looking back down into the basin. "I told him that she has been putting something in our coffee or tea at night. I've been throwing mine out when her back was turned. Dad wouldn't believe me.

"A little while ago something awoke me." She wheeled back. "I thought it was a scream from somewhere. I sat up and touched Dad. My stepmother wasn't there. I don't know what made me, but I looked for the money box. It was gone. Then I heard a scream, Jesse. I tried again to wake Dad. I shook him, pounded him, and then I know I heard another scream.

"Oh, God, look, Jesse!" She was suddenly screaming and pointing northwestward. "What is that terrible cloud of a thing coming down the slope of the basin!"

"Get hold of yourself, Anna!" he cried, sweeping her to one side and swinging a six-shooter into the air to roar every cartridge

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in its chamber toward the sky. "This is a fight! *Indians! Wake, settlers, and fight!*"

"Lawd, Cap'n Jesse!" Banjo Joe's cry of terror came to him from behind the cabin. "They's comin' at us from crost the river too! Lawd! Lawd! Watch them ponies ab'ilin' down de hill! Mosten'about all the mean Indians evah bo'n!"

NO ONE ever doubted that it was the coming of the girl and the firing of that six-shooter on the rise that startled the settlers out of their beds. Within thirty seconds after the alarm it was inferno let loose in Montana. For months there had been tales of Indians rising all over, and here it was at hand, the growing thunder of the pounding pony's hoofs, the Indian screeching, yelling and crying, settler wives screaming and children wailing like countless lost souls in Hell.

The shots ripped in and out, eight out of ten of the settlers warned just in time to rise and see shadowy figures on foot stealing up to kill. In a matter of moments every wagon was becoming a smoking fort, the sounds of gunfire rolling, the flames stabbing bright blades, and men and women cursing, crying and screaming, fighting like devils with their backs to the wall their bullets raking into the running lines of feathered figures on ponies sweeping between them.

Jesse Blood never expected to find real fighting blood in Banjo Joe. He was so old and churchly no man could have expected to find so much as a drop of it in his veins. But there were guns and ammunition in the cabin, enough to arm eight men, and Banjo Joe pitched in. Once started, he was not the pious deacon.

They weathered the first charge on the rise, sending mounted figures sprawling from their ponies, and they weathered the second in the same withering fashion with the girl down on her knees shoveling cartridges into rifles and six-shooters, then handing them to the fighting hands that were anxiously reaching for them.

The Indians had been tricked. No Indian could have thought of it as anything else. He had listened to a white man. Afterwards it was known that that white man had promised him many guns and many, many bullets to go with them. Had the white man kept his word this thing would have gone as planned. The Indian had kept faith, following every promise. He had sent in the old bucks and old squaws.

Just when they were ready to strike, right when a dozen were already striking sleeping victims with knives, a voice as far-reaching as a bugle call and the noise of a six-shooter firing on the rise near the river had spread the alarm and upset everything. It was far

more effective than if they had set a signal.

Even the youngest buck must have soon realized that he was dashing straight into his death. There was gunfire from wagons to the right and left, gunfire from behind and from ahead, pouring straight into his teeth, knocking the running pony from under him, killing him as he rolled clear and leaped to his feet to flee. Surely this was a trap, another lie of the white man's tongue that forever lied when an Indian listened to its wheedling words!

And the rise was no better. The band that swept across the river charged it for a third and a fourth time, and they died as if it had all been carefully planned for them to come charging up and along either side of that long toe of rock extending down into the water.

Breathing gunsmoke for air, weary and worn in no time as though he had done a tremendously hard day's work chopping down trees and trimming and cutting them into logs, Jesse Blood saw the battle's turning. It came suddenly when it came, thin lines of warriors streaking on through the settlement, unable to turn back, the gunfire still raking them, riders dropping one after another as they fled on to southward—little bands of them cut to ribbons and going on up the slope. Here and there a buck still let go and rolled off his sweating pony's back—and others rode away, dropping blood as they rode.

"YES, licked here, they rid on to Paint Rock Post for revenge." Dawn brought that report from lean and buckskinned old Andy Hightower who had ridden on with a little gang of fighting men to the bluffs and back.

"Some of ol' Bull Buzzby's gang—mostly wimmin—got away, hidin' in the bluffs above the water until it was done, but Bull didn't. He's lyin' there in front of his hall of thieves with his throat cut an' his scalp taken. Queer thing is, Lige Fallon, new clothes an' all, is lyin' there not far in the same damn' fix.

"An' then there was Mr. Randell." He lowered his voice as Blood and Annabell Hawk came up after searching all over for some trace of her father. "He was headin' toward Paint Rock Post, it seems, when some Indian got 'im. With him—"

Hightower broke off suddenly, staring at the girl clinging to Blood's arm, then, behind him, they saw Matt Hawk coming slowly down the slope on an old gray horse he had found somewhere. As he pulled up a few rods above the crowd Blood and the girl hurried forward.

"She's up there too," he told them gravely, face looking a yard long and his eyes half-

dazed. "Killed in a little gully not far behind him. Yuh was right, Annabell." He reached out and pulled the girl to him. "I guess she was feedin' me somethin'. I didn't wake up until the fight was just about nearing its end."

"We'll forget, Dad." She slipped an arm around him. "It's a new land. I know about the money box."

"It's still up there." Hawk almost smiled. "Lyn' right under him. My daddy worked hard for the farm that we sold before leavin' Missouri. I'm 'most sorry they didn't get on an' away with the box. I'll bet they'd abeen plum downcast when they busted it open only to find I'd taken out the gold an' put in some

iron bolts an' things about a week ago. A nice surprise for 'em!

"But at that," he really smiled now, "I can't say I hate 'im. He shore hell was tryin' to take 'er away from me—an', by grab, I'm damned an' double-damned if I ain't been apinin' for somebody to do that."

"Granny Jones has got it!" A wild yell was going up down the slope. Blood watched and saw a gang dancing around an old woman chewing on a blade of grass. Others were wheeling, plucking up stems of grass and beginning to chew it. "My vote to Granny Jones. It is as sweet as honey. Honeygrass Basin it is!"

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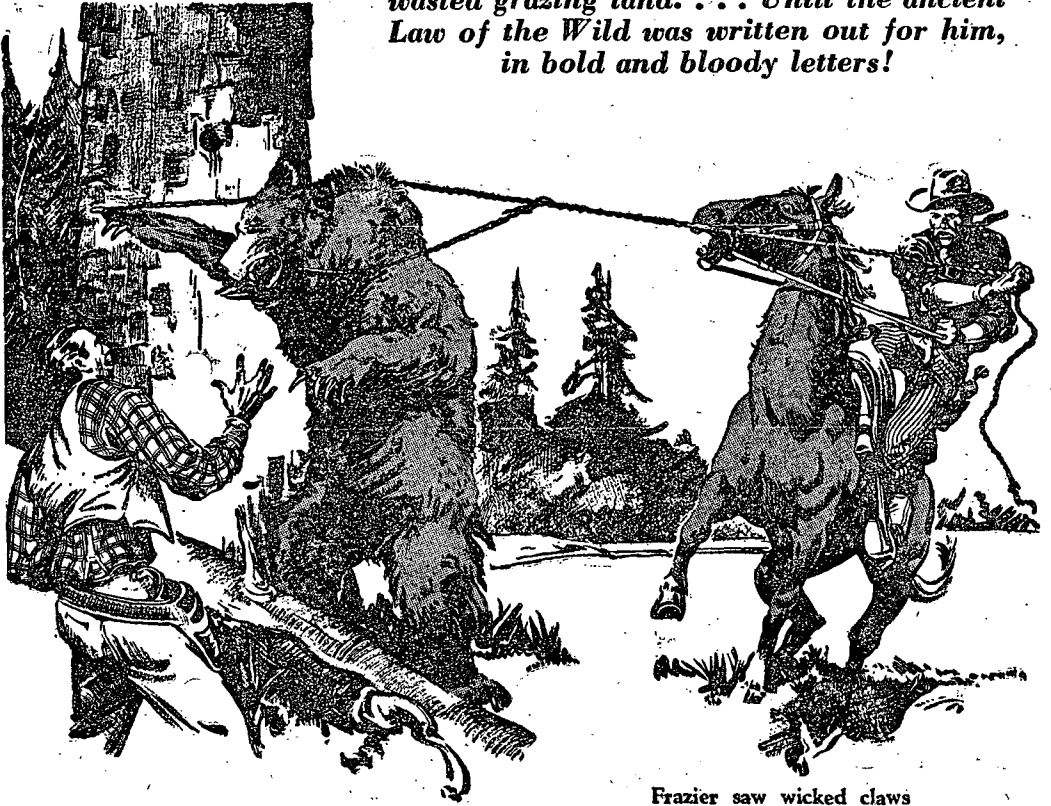
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LAW OF THE CLAW AND FANG

By William A. Rush

To Barron Frazier, new owner of the Half Moon ranch, King was just another grizzly, and Switchback Basin was just so many acres of wasted grazing land. . . . Until the ancient Law of the Wild was written out for him, in bold and bloody letters!



Frazier saw wicked claws reach out for him.

THE Blackfeet Indians called him Afraid-of-Nothing. But the cowboys from the Half Moon ranch who hunted deer and elk on the Switchback range and saw the grizzly's tracks in the snow, heard the Indians tell of his prowess and they dubbed him King of Switchback.

Larry Barnes, foreman of the Half Moon had seen the King a number of times and knew his habits almost as well as the Indians did. Once he and his top saddle horse, Hi-Jack, had tangled with the big grizzly at close quarters.

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King was big, even for a grizzly. He stood flatfooted a full four feet high at his humped shoulders. From the tip of his ridiculous two-inch tail to the tip of his marvellously keen nose he measured more than eight feet. Larry found the mark-tree one summer when he was on a fishing expedition and measured to the highest five-clawed mark in the soft aspen wood. It was nine feet above ground.

King had hibernated in the same den high up on Sideout Peak, for more than twenty years. Every spring he took the same route down long, narrow Corrugate Ridge to a

saddle where he entered a stretch of forest and found his first food of the season.

He was out earlier than usual this year. A chill wind blew from the glaciers and the ground was stiff with frost. The thick pads of King's feet were tender from non-use and the hard, rocky ground wore them to the quick before he had traveled more than a half dozen miles. He tore savagely at the rotten wood of an old log with claws and teeth. His reward was a mere taste of white grubs. He strode on to a meadow near Bowl Creek where the soil was soft and springy. With bleeding feet he dug bulbs of dog-toothed violets and the sweet, nutty roots of yampa to break his five months' fast. As he munched the starchy food some of his hunger and ill nature vanished. It was good to be alive again and out in the world.

SEVENTY miles to the east, on the Half Moon ranch, Larry Barnes argued with the new owner, young Barron Frazier. They were in the log shack that was office and quarters for the boss.

"It's like this, Larry," said young Frazier, "we run about twenty-five hundred cattle on our forty-two thousand acres of pasture. If we could graze another thousand without buying more land there would be a good profit in this ranch."

The lean, saddle-hardened old rider shook his head. "We're usin' all the open free range now."

"How about Switchback Basin? Nick Peters of the Flying U told me there was a world of good feed there."

Larry's eyes searched the hard-headed young fellow's face, as they might survey a poker player who kept raising the bet. "Switchback River's a long ways from here and it's smack dab in the middle of the Rocky Mountains."

"It's not too far. Get some horses and a camp outfit together and we'll take a look at it."

Young Frazier reached across the table to a box of cigars. Larry fumbled in a shirt pocket for his sack of Bull Durham and papers. His gnarled fingers made a cigarette and he was smoking almost as quickly as his boss. The argument was over, for the time, at least. Larry nodded and turned toward the door. Barron Frazier's big Belgian police dog, Tobe, got to its feet from under the table and stood looking at Larry until the door closed behind him.

There were times when Larry liked the young business-man who had bought the mortgage when old man Hamilton had died six months before. Frazier used good sense in getting the outfit on a paying basis and Larry admired him for that. The man saw everything from a business standpoint, however, there was little warmth in his make-up.

"Round up all the old bulls on the ranch. We'll ship them to the construction gang on the G.N. for beef. I've ordered ninety young purebred Hereford bulls from the Muddy Creek Ranch." That had been the first of several drastic orders.

"Gather the horse herd. We're feeding and paying taxes on five hundred and fifty head. Seventy-five young horses are all we need. Gull everything over seven or eight years old. We can run six hundred more cattle on the feed these worthless horses eat."

That order had hurt. The old foreman protested, "There's some good cayuses in that bunch, hosses that know ropin' and roundups and how to find their way home in a blizzard. The best of 'em are eight, nine—maybe ten years old."

Barron Frazier's voice held a note of finality. "They won't sell for ten dollars a head. I'm going to make this ranch pay. That's why I bought it!"

"What do you aim to do with the cayuses?"

"Sell them to a buyer from Butte for whatever I can get, even if it's only five dollars a head."

"That means they wind up in a can for dog food—city dogs eatin' our old cayuses—a hell of an end for a cow pony!" Larry's voice was little more than a whisper.

Even more heart-breaking than that was the task Barron Frazier gave Larry one cold, windy morning. "We've got to get rid of a lot of these old fellows on the payroll," he said abruptly. "Twenty-six men are too many. Pick out ten or twelve of the youngest and best hands and let the rest go."

No one could make a stock ranch pay, and keep a bunch of broken down cowpokes around. Firing old men was good business—but how about their end of it? Where would they go? Jobs were scarce and none of them had much money saved. They had done Larry many a good turn. It would be bitter hard to tell them they were fired. Larry looked at his employer and flared, "See here, I'm old, too. I think I better quit. I was forty-two last summer!"

Barron Frazier shook his head. "I want you to stay. I'm going to tear down every building on this ranch. These log shacks are an eyesore. I'm going to build a new set of houses. There will be a foreman's house for you and Mrs. Barnes—besides—" he flipped ashes from his cigar, "your pay will be upped twenty-five dollars a month."

Larry studied the toe of his well worn boot. He would be worth the extra money, and more too, if he did everything the boss wanted him to. It was business, but so damned heartless. Everything old that didn't pay dividends had to go. Cattle, horses, buildings and even men. The Half Moon would never be the easy going place again.

Foreman jobs were even scarcer than jobs for rides. And even if Larry were willing to go out and ride until he found one, he couldn't pass up that extra twenty-five dollars and promise of a new house for his wife. It was what she had always wanted, a real house instead of a log cabin.

"I'll stay," he said quietly.

"Give each man you let go three extra month's pay."

Larry looked up quickly. Barron Frazier was fondling Tobe's ears, his face a little flushed. Maybe there's a human streak in him after all, Larry thought.

AS SOON as the snow was gone the old cowhand and his employer rode the Switchback range from their camp on the divide. Barron Frazier had picked out a fine looking five year old bay gelding for his mount. Larry rode Hi-Jack, a tall, rangy, crop-eared, nervous brown. Tobe, the big dog, followed close to the heels of his master's horse. The wolf-like dog was never very far from young Frazier and like his master was all business. Tobe never played with anyone, never let anyone but Barron fondle him.

They had been riding for a couple of days when the boss gave his verdict. "This is a fine country for cattle. We could run a thousand whitefaces here just as well as not."

Larry swung his lean body half around in the saddle. "This country's always been considered huntin' territory," he said. "It's kind of a place for deer, elk, moose and—well, bears."

"Those things won't make us any money," said young Frazier flatly. "A thousand Herefords will."

"Always business!" thought Larry. Barron Frazier meant to make this wilderness country just another cow pasture. The grass would be eaten, the bubbling mountain springs trampled into mud, choice parks for camping despoiled and trails rolled full of rocks. All the wild things would be forced to go. Good business—oh, there would be a terrific profit in it, all right.

"Seems like this country is so big there ought to be room in it for bears and things," Larry argued. "Seems like a corner of the mountains like Switchback could be held out for deers and elks—there's moose in here, too. I seen two of the big, black, ugly fellers once. Seems like even old King's got some rights, bein' as how he's been the ramrod back here fer twenty-two years that I know of."

"King?" said Barron Frazier. "Who's he?"

"An old silver-tip bear. We used to try to bag the old boy years ago when we come back here-huntin'. Got bullets into him a few times. Old Hank Macey caught him in a trap once, but the King got loose by beatin' the steel trap

on a rock until it flew off with part of the bear's foot in it. Another time he got hold of some pizen and we didn't see hide nor hair of him for a couple o' years. He must of been awful sick. Then old Hank went after him with dogs. Hank got back, but his dogs never did."

"A good dog has nothing to fear from a bear," said Barron Frazier a little impatiently. "Tobe could take care of himself with any of them."

"A lone dog ain't got such a good chance as you might think," protested Larry. "Once is enough for a grizzly to blow his breath in a dog's face—or a man's, for that matter! Neither of 'em is ever quite the same afterward!"

Larry broke off as Hi-Jack jerked up his head, snorted and pointed both ears stiffly forward. Larry straightened in the saddle and tightened up on the reins.

Tobe gave an excited bark and dashed ahead.

"What's up?" asked Barron Frazier.

"Bear, I reckon, from the way Hi-Jack acts. See how he prances on his tiptoes? Once, 'long about ten years back I was ridin' him in these mountains and run smack into old King. I had a 44-40 on my saddle and I opened up on him, fast as I could pump the lever, but he kept comin'. This cayuse got in a corner and I had old King's hot breath in my face fer a minute, but Hi-Jack didn't stampede like most horses would. He kept his head and got me out o' that jackpot."

"How long ago was that?" said young Frazier.

"Ten—maybe eleven years."

"And you were riding that horse? Larry, just how old is that horse?"

The old cowboy felt his face get red. He had let his tongue slip. "Fourteen this spring," he admitted reluctantly.

"I thought I told you to dispose of every horse over seven or eight years old."

"This horse is sound as any on the ranch!"

"That isn't the point. You didn't carry out my orders!"

Any answer Larry might have made to that was drowned out by a chorus of loud, joyous barks from Tobe, ahead on the trail.

"Let's get on and see what Tobe has at bay," said Barron Frazier shortly. "We'll finish this discussion later."

"Let's don't be in a hurry!" Larry objected. "From the way old Hi-Jack acts it's a bear—maybe old King hisself."

His employer looked his disgust. "Who's afraid of a doddering old bear!" he exclaimed, spurred his horse past Larry and with drawn six-shooter forged ahead. They were in a small circular park of two or three acres with heavy timber all around.

Suddenly Tobe changed his tune. There was a loud yelp of pain, succeeded by yapping fright as Tobe raced back up the trail toward his master. Behind the dog galloped old King, huge red mouth agape, white teeth gleaming. He caught up with Tobe and grazed his rump with claws sharper than a cat's. Tobe yelped louder and increased his speed. The noise of the grizzly's padded feet on the trail was like a bare-footed horse running on soft dirt.

Barron Frazier reined in his horse and held his pistol hand high. The five year old was hard to manage. It turned in the trail and tried to bolt. Barron had all he could do to hold the horse back. Hi-Jack danced on tip-toes, but faced the music, waiting for his master to tell him what to do.

LARRY thought of how many times he had heard of silly dogs doing this very thing that Tobe was doing, tie into a bear, then dash straight back to men and horses with tail between legs, yelping its fright with the bear at its heels. The bear was always plenty mad, on such occasions. A steady man on the ground with a rifle might have a chance to kill it, on a horse he had no chance at all. Nine times out of ten the horse would rear, turn crazily and try to run away. Even a good pistol shot had no chance. If a few pistol bullets happened to hit the bear it would not even slow its mad charge. The only thing to do was run—let the horses have their heads and run away as fast as they could. The heavily muscled bear would not follow for more than a few hundred yards before it tired and quit.

"Come on!" Larry yelled. "Let's get the hell out of here while we can!"

"Go on!" his boss shouted back. "Go on and leave me. I'm finding out just what kind of a man you are. I'm not afraid of any bear!"

There was no time to argue. Tobe burst out of the forest with King reaching for him at every jump. Barron's horse reared and wheeled. Barron shot once, the bullet flying

nearer Larry than it did the bear. King's mouth was open wide enough to swallow Tobe whole.

Barron fired again and the bear reared. The bay horse lunged frantically and Barron jerked hard on the bit to keep it from wheeling. The horse's hind legs became entangled in a small down sapling and it stumbled backwards. Old King rushed, struck the horse on the head and knocked it flat.

Almost as quickly as the bear struck Larry unbuckled his lariat strap. Hi-Jack was tap dancing but he did not try to bolt. He savvied the rope business and he savvied his rider. A loop whirled out and with almost the same arm motion snaked through the air toward King and the unhorsed man.

Barron Frazier saw wicked claws and sharp white teeth reach out for him. Instinctively he shut his eyes and flung an arm across his face.

Neatly the loop dropped over King's massive head. Hi-Jack jumped as Larry wound several turns of his rope around the saddle horn and touched spurs to the horses's belly. King was unceremoniously jerked backward. He reached out a paw, caught a claw under the choking loop and slipped his head free. Then he went for Larry and Hi-Jack.

The horse side-stepped. The bear struck with claws that could rip a horse's shoulder to the bone. Larry let Hi-Jack have his head for a few seconds while his rider retrieved the rope and whirled out a loop.

Barron Frazier's horse scrambled to its feet and tore crazily up the trail. Tobe had all of that bear he wanted and was a few leaps ahead of the bay horse. Barron Frazier sat up. King charged toward him, roaring like a bull. Again Larry's loop fell true and again King went over backward.

"Run!" yelled Larry. "Get up and run!"

Barron Frazier scrambled to his feet and took the trail at his best speed behind Tobe and the horse. King did not free himself this time as quickly as he had before. Hi-Jack kept the rope tight and every time the grizzly

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started rolling to his feet he was jerked to the ground.

"I've got you, King!" groaned Larry, "but the Lord only knows how I'm goin' to let you go!"

The grizzly roared his fury, tumbled on the ground and snapped again and again at the rope. Then he rolled, Larry gave him slack and the rope wrapped around the bear's body. Larry made his turns on the saddle horn and touched spurs to Hi-Jack. As the rope unwound, King rolled over and over like a log and came up against a tree with a crash. For a full minute Hi-Jack held him there, helpless.

Larry's saddle rope was a linen rattler, hard and strong as sole leather, but King caught at it and snapped it with his teeth as Mrs. Barnes would bite off mending cotton.

"Time for us to get the hell out!" gasped Larry, reining the brown horse into the trail in the opposite direction from that which Barron had taken.

There was a deep ravine, too wide for the horse to leap, too steep for him to take at full speed. Hi-Jack wheeled away at right angles in a long jump downhill that would have unseated a less skilful rider. King slashed at the horse's rump, but got only a paw full of tail hairs.

Ahead was a swamp, easy for the bear to negotiate, treacherous for the horse. Hi-Jack took it in short hops and stayed on top, instead of making long leaps that would have bogged him.

A series of rock outcroppings were next. Larry leaned low over the horse's neck and prayed that Hi-Jack would not stumble and fall. The horse had a good lead on the grizzly when he struck the first rocks. He slowed to keep his feet and King gained until he was only a yard behind when Hi-Jack leaped out to good going again.

In the next stretch of boulders Hi-Jack slowed to a trot. Larry turned to look back. King had given up the chase! The hard, jagged rocks had been too much for his sore feet.

Larry and his horse made a wide circle in the forest and picked their way back toward camp. Before they reached the tent they met Barron Frazier, rifle in hand, on his way back to the scene of battle. "By Gad, he was comin' back to help me!" thought Larry, and forgave the boss for a lot of things, right there.

Neither of the men said anything for an hour or more. Tobe was so thoroughly cowed he could not be coaxed from his corner in the tent. Barron Frazier's young bay horse was ruined. It would never be fit to ride again. Hi-Jack munched oats from a nose bag, seemingly none the worse for his experience.

"Well!" Young Frazier broke out a fresh

cigar and lighted it. "I've been doing some figuring. I've changed my mind about this Switchback country. We can make a reasonable profit as it is. Old King can have this."

In two long strides Larry reached his boss and held out his hand. "Fine! That's purty fine!"

"You told me a man was never the same after a grizzly's hot breath warmed his face." Barron Frazier's cheeks were flushed but he kept on, "It does something to a man when he sees somebody risk his life for him, too. If you want that grizzly to keep on being King of Switchback—well, I certainly owe you that much!"

Larry grinned. Looked as if life on the Half Moon was going to be a lot more pleasant from now on.

FAR downstream old King lay in a mud wallow to cool his aching feet. When it was light he strode with long, swinging steps to a nearby meadow. A black bear was digging for bulbs. King stopped to watch him for a moment, then strode on. At the edge of a deep pool a mean looking grizzly lay eyeing some Dolly Varden trout. The bear was waiting until they ventured into shallow water where he could scoop one out on the bank with a lightning paw. King reared half erect and rumbled a growl. This was his territory. No other grizzly had any business on Switchback river.

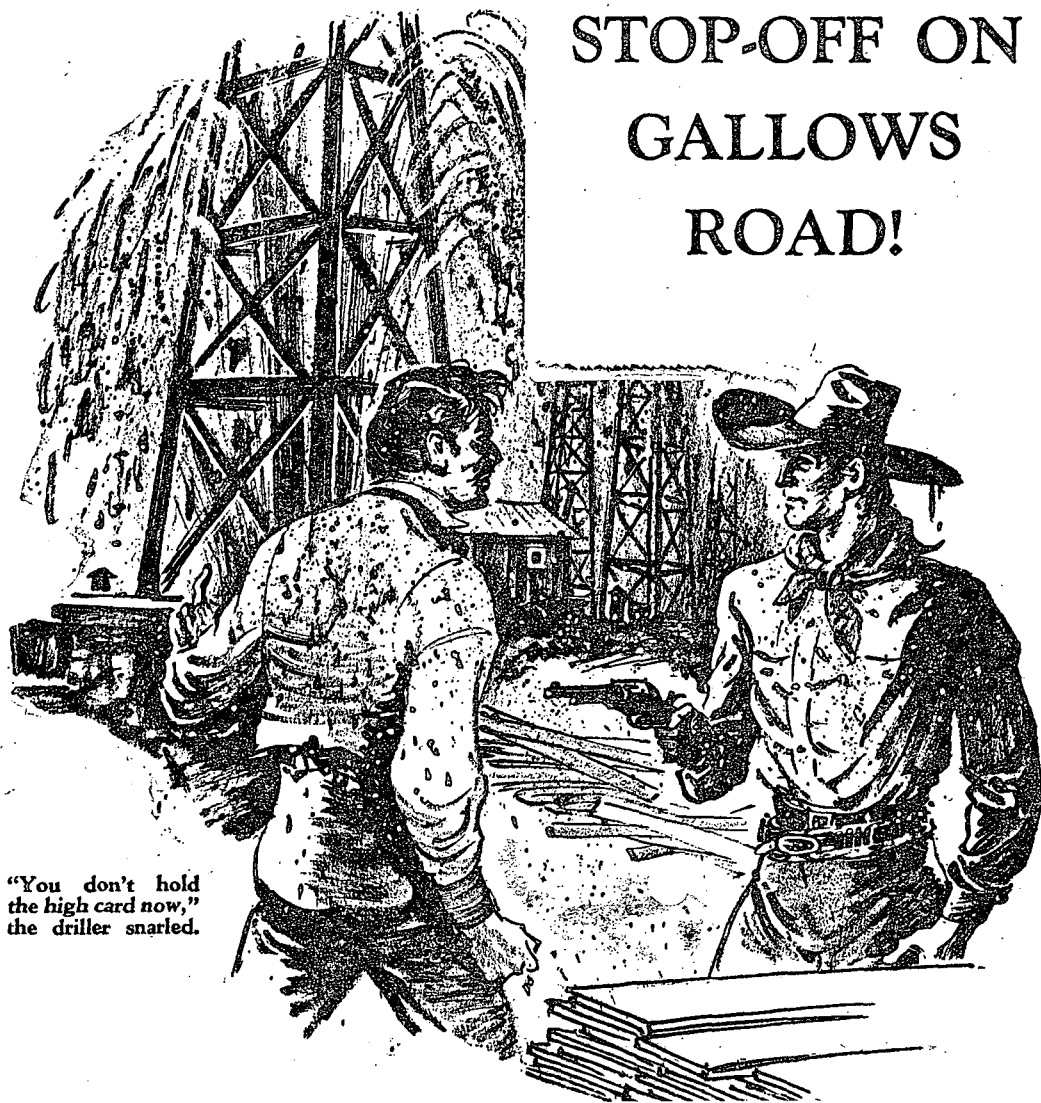
The other bear heard him and reared. For a moment they eyed each other. Disregarding his sore feet King rushed, front paws flailing and great mouth agape. The other bear parried the blows, turned and retreated down country as fast as he could gallop.

King craved fresh, red meat. At the border of a swamp he saw an old bull elk, two cows and a yearling, grazing on succulent sedge. This small band of elk had drifted upstream from their wintering range. They would follow the line of receding snow to bountiful summer pastures in the high mountains.

King crept through the underbrush, his great bulk moving with all the stealth of a lynx, until he was a hundred feet uphill from the elk. He paused to survey his chances. The big bull could wheel at the slightest warning and in one jump be out of reach. The cows would leap straight ahead across a deep, narrow channel. The yearling had its head down behind a clump of low willows. It would have to wheel, like the bull, but it would be a second late. A second was all King needed.

The grizzly's furious rush was a ball shot out of a cannon. The young elk never knew what happened, the end was so quick and clean. The grizzly feasted on meat, food intended by Nature for the King of Switchback.

STOP-OFF ON GALLOWS ROAD!



"You don't hold
the high card now,"
the driller snarled.

By Ennen Reaves Hall

Jeff Marlow's birthday must have been Friday the 13th. . . . For his saddle-mate had just been bushwhacked, his range was shot to hell, his girl hated him. . . . And now the law pinned on him the backshoot murder of the only gent who might lift his jinx!

JEFF MARLOW watched the thick fingers of the Post City banker shuffle the papers on his desk nervously. Link Adams' voice sounded a little nervous, too.

"That's all I can do, folks," he said curtly, and then added, "Jeff, you knew when you and Buck got that money to put into your wildcat well that you had just ninety days to pay it

back. Now the time's up, the well's dry and I've got to have the money or the land. That's all!"

"But three days, Mister Adams." Neva Waldrep's soft voice held a note of despair that flicked Jeff on the raw. "Surely you know we can't raise ten thousand dollars in three days."

Link Adams' voice hardened, as though in defense against the pleading in her voice. "Three days or three months is all the same if you haven't got the money, Miss Waldrep. And right now I've got a buyer for your ranch who just won't wait. I'm sorry about your troubles but after all you can't expect me to take all the loss."

That sounded reasonable enough but it didn't satisfy Jeff. He leaned forward. "Might I ask who your buyer is, Link?"

A little red crept into the banker's face. "I consider that my affair," he said, stiffly. "Yours, is to raise the money, Jeff. You can't blame me for making the best deal I can."

Jeff pressed his question. "That buyer's name wouldn't happen to be Brent Carter, would it? Seems to me he hasn't lost interest in the W Bar M just because he failed to find oil there."

Adams' face got redder but Jeff's rebuke came from his partner, Neva Waldrep. "That's unfair, Jeff, and you know it. Brent lost time and money both in that well and he's not complaining. It was all a gamble and we may as well take our medicine like good sports."

Wordlessly, Jeff followed Neva from the room, resentment hot within him. Neva had made him sound like a poor loser who complained because he lost in a fair game. She took that attitude every time their trouble was mentioned, refusing to share Jeff's stubborn belief that it hadn't been a fair game, that somewhere along the line they'd been dealt cards from a stacked deck.

Jeff knew he hadn't much grounds for such thoughts. Yet he couldn't shake it off. Was it because he was reluctant to admit defeat and face the loss of the ranch he and Buck Waldrep had worked years to get? He couldn't be sure it wasn't. He wasn't sure of anything any more, except that his world was upside down. Buck was dead, the well they'd gambled ten thousand dollars on was a failure, the beef money was lost and now the land would be, too. And Neva, he felt, blamed him for all of it. How could he tell her that the whole thing had been Buck's idea, that he'd opposed the drilling scheme until he saw how much Buck was set on it? That Buck himself had made that short time loan? It would be a coward's trick to put all the blame on a dead man, and Neva had enough trouble without rubbing it in like that. But it burned Jeff up to see the way she'd fallen for Brent Carter's soft soaping, the same as her brother had. Nothing Jeff could say would turn her against the oil driller because she was so sure Buck had trusted him.

Jeff squirmed inwardly at the thought. Buck had trusted Carter. That was the beginning of all their troubles. But Buck, if he was here, might listen to Jeff now instead of Brent

Carter. Something that his sister wouldn't do.

WHEN they reached the hitchrack Jeff said, carefully, dreading the way she'd take it. "Neva, I got a feeling we're being pushed out for a better reason than Link Adams says. Suppose there's really oil in that hole and we didn't know it..."

Neva's amber colored eyes flashed fire. "That's pretty silly, Jeff! You've been watching the drilling and you haven't seen any oil, have you? And Brent would know if there was any sign of it. He's got a fourth interest for drilling, you know, so why should he lie about it. I do wish you'd be sensible, Jeff, and get home and start packing."

But Jeff only stood and watched her ride off, her blond head held high in spite of the bitter blow they'd just had. Almost reluctantly he admitted to himself that Neva Waldrep had guts. The same kind of guts that Buck had. Thinking of Buck, Jeff felt that twisting pain inside him again. You can't live and work with a man for six years without coming to either hate him or love him deeply. Jeff had loved Buck Waldrep, even when he couldn't agree with him. Buck's death had been a terrific blow, far harder to take than even the loss of the money Buck was carrying when the road agents jumped him. Money intended to pay off the mortgage on the ranch. Neva had come on to take Buck's place and her attitude of suspicion and distrust hadn't helped any.

It was still early in the day for drinking but Jeff decided a quick one might help. He wanted to put off his returning to the ranch as long as he could. That packing job would wait. He crossed the street to the Crescent Saloon and went in.

The place was almost deserted, except for the bartender and four men who were playing cards. Two of them he knew—Jack Wilson, a gambler who made the Crescent his headquarters, and Rab Martin, tool dresser for Brent Carter. Martin was a crabby sort of fellow who talked little and minded his own business. In the three months he'd been working on the W Bar M Jeff hadn't spoken a dozen words to him. But Martin was talking now and there was a tense, strained note in his voice that attracted Jeff's attention. "I'll see you and raise you twenty."

Interested, Jeff took his drink and went over to watch the game. It was stud poker and it was plain that Martin was losing heavily. Jeff wondered idly if no one had ever tipped him off that stud was no game for a stranger when Jack Wilson sat in.

Wilson shuffled the cards expertly and dealt again. Jeff turned away, his interest gone. Then out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement of the gambler's hand that made him change his mind. Another deal and he

was certain. Wilson and the other two were working together. They were out to trim Rab Martin.

Jeff had no special liking for Martin but he hated to see anyone played for a sucker. He walked behind Martin, facing the other players. Hand on the butt of his gun he said almost casually: "You're being cheated, Martin. Wilson dealt you that hand from the bottom of the deck."

Wilson swore and grabbed for his gun, as did the others. But Jeff was quicker. He had them all covered.

"Hold everything!" he ordered. "No need getting upset just because I caught your crooked play, Jack. All I figger on doing is to give Martin a fair break. How much are you out, Martin?"

"Four hundred," the tool dresser said, a little unsteadily. "All the back pay I drew this morning."

"Pay off, Wilson," Jeff ordered. "Every damn cent of it. I'd take it as a real pleasure to let daylight through a cheap card cheat and every man in the country will back my play. Now shell out pronto!"

The gambler was too smart to argue. Any moment the batwing doors might open to let in other men. He counted out Martin's losses, careful to keep his hands above table. Then Jeff motioned Martin out ahead of him and didn't turn his back on the room or holster his gun until the doors had swung shut behind him.

Silently the two men mounted and as Jeff turned toward the trail to the ranch Martin fell in beside him. He didn't say anything until the town was behind them. Then he suddenly pulled up short.

"Thanks for what you done back there, Marlow. I know I was a fool to get roped into that. That roll was all I got in the world and me out of a job now that Carter has shut down."

"I hate a cheat," Jeff said, quietly.

THEY rode on and nothing more was said until they were close to the W Bar M. Then Martin guessed he'd turn back, since he'd already moved his few things from the ranch. But he hesitated and Jeff knew he had something on his mind. He waited and the other man finally blurted out:

"I like to pay back a good turn, Marlow. I may get a belly full of lead for this, but you stand to lose your spread on account of this oil gamble!"

Jeff winced, still finding the thought intolerable, but nodded. "Looks like it, Martin. Buck and me borrowed from the bank to raise money for drilling. Gave the ranch as security, aiming to sell beef to pay off. But you know what happened to that. Buck was held

up on his way home, this side of Red Rock, and killed for the money. Now the well's shut down, the bank is foreclosing and I'm out of the game for keeps."

Martin said, soberly, "And as crooked a game as the one you just stopped, Marlow. I'm convinced that well ain't the duster Carter says it is, though of course he handles the log and I might be talking out of turn."

Jeff was silent a moment, digesting this idea "Then maybe I'm right in thinking it's Carter who's dealing for the W Bar M with Adams. If he gets the land he gets all the oil instead of just his interest for drilling."

"Exactly. And there might be millions involved. From the whiff I got of that last test core it must have been saturated. Chances are Carter is offering Adams a big profit to push you out, without letting Adams know he's letting go a gold mine."

Jeff felt he was right. "Adams never has had any faith in us striking oil, tried to talk Buck out of it. He'd jump at a chance to make a profit, now that he knows I'm cleaned. But of course if I had some proof the oil was there I might deal him in . . ."

Rab Martin shook his head. "If you had proof, Marlow, there'd be a flock of royalty buyers and lease hounds shoving money in your face. But not on a wildcat play like this, with nothing to show them. And Carter's smart enough to hide the evidence if he wants to. I figured that when he shut down so sudden-like last week that we were in the shale then and he was afraid of bringing it in before he was ready."

Defeat became more bitter than ever in Jeff's soul. His helplessness to cope with a situation like this infuriated him. He didn't know how to cope with tricksters and legal land grabbers. If it had been something he could lay his hands on things would be different. But this. . . .

He said, helplessly, "Thanks for the tip, Martin. But I still can't raise ten thousand dollars in three days. If there's oil there like you think, it looks like Carter will get it all."

"Maybe there's a way, Marlow," Martin said, slowly. "I've been thinking on the ride out here. I happen to know Carter's got nitro in his town warehouse. What's he keeping it for unless he plans to shoot when he's ready? Well, I can shoot a well, if I had the stuff. If I'm right in my guess a good shot would bring that well in and all your troubles would be over."

Excitement began rising in Jeff. He thought swiftly, then told the tool dresser. "Maybe I can get the warehouse keys, Martin. Carter comes out to the ranch every night to see Buck's sister. On the way back to town he could be held up . . . But he'd have to be kept out of the way while you worked."

"Yes. And I couldn't do a thing till daylight. But an hour after that might do the job. Any chance to hold him off my tail that long, Marlow? But I've got to warn you it's risky business. I could be wrong..."

"In that case I'll answer to Carter. And if it turns out you're right then he'll be answering to me for what he's tried to put over. It's a gamble, all right, but hell, I'm in up to my neck now. I'm willing to take this one more risk for the sake of the girl. She had no part in this screwy deal and I hate to stand by and see her swindled. You just let me handle Carter, Martin. I know a dugout in the hills that'll make a good jail for a few hours."

They planned hurriedly and parted. Martin turned his horse's head toward town and Jeff rode up into the sand hills to make sure the dugout was still unoccupied and ready. Once he stopped and listened, thinking he heard the sound of a single shot. But it wasn't repeated so he rode on. A shot wasn't an unusual sound on the open ranges of western Oklahoma with the new state still in its infancy.

JEFF managed to avoid Neva until supper time. He'd decided not to let her in on his plans, knowing she would oppose, and possibly block him. All through the evening meal, which was eaten in a strained silence, he studied her covertly and wondered what had come between them. He'd known Neva Waldrep since her pigtail days, when she spent her summer vacations on the ranch. He'd taught her to ride and to shoot and he'd always thought of her as much his sister as Buck's. Now, suddenly, she was a cold-eyed stranger.

But a beautiful stranger. The twilight's afterglow came through the window behind her and touched her hair with gold and softened the shadow of grief that had lain in her eyes since her return to the ranch. In a startled surprise he realized that she had grown since he'd last seen her. She was a woman now. A lovely woman, with a will and a mind of her own, and who no longer liked or trusted the man who had always befriended her. Could that be Brent Carter's fault, too? What chance did a plain rancher have against Carter's good looks and smooth talk.

Suddenly feeling very awkward, Jeff rose to leave the table, his plate almost untouched. Neva rose, too, and stopped him at the door.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, Jeff. I suppose there's things we should talk over. A little money in the bank to divide and a few cattle..."

He said, carefully, "There's not much, Neva. But I want you to have it all. We can go over things tomorrow. You'll be entertaining Carter tonight as usual, I reckon."

"Yes, I will." A quick note of defiance was back in her voice. "Why don't you stay and talk to him, Jeff? He says you never will and I know he could convince you..."

Jeff's bitterness got the upper hand. "Sure, I know," he jibed. "Carter's a smooth talker but I'm not convinced as easy as you are. I'm not in love with him..."

He stopped short, appalled at what he had said. Neva's eyes darkened and her face flushed with anger. She said, scathingly: "So Brent is right—you're just jealous of him. That's why you've accused him and distrusted him!"

The shock of her words jarred Jeff completely. It hadn't occurred to him before; but in that moment he knew it was true. He was jealous of Brent Carter because he loved Neva Waldrep. And there was nothing of brotherly affection in his feeling for her, either. He'd been kidding himself about that.

His thoughts must have been reflected in his face for Neva took a quick backward step, alarm filling her eyes. "Jeff," she faltered, "I shouldn't have said that..."

"Why not?" he asked, quietly, though a consuming force like a prairie fire was sweeping through him. "It's true, Neva. I am jealous of Carter. Jealous as hell, because I'm in love with you myself. That makes me out to be about as high as a snake's belly, don't it, seeing how I've been playing up this big brother stuff for years. Well, go on and laugh. I know it's damned funny. Tell Carter about it, too, so he can laugh also. But he'd better do his laughing tonight for tomorrow might be too late."

He had said too much, things he'd wish unsaid. Words born of that fire raging in him. Half blindly he turned and groped for the door and went out, hearing her startled, "Jeff, wait!" but not heeding it. It was early, an hour before night, but he went to the corral and led his mare out of the gate. He'd ride to town and wait for Carter.

IT WAS then he saw the riders turning into the yard. There were a half dozen or more of the men, all grim faced and strangely silent. Leading them was Cy Turner, a deputy sheriff at Post City. Wondering, Jeff waited while they rode up and surrounded him. His surprise deepened to swift alarm as he saw the gun in Turner's hand.

"We've come to take you in, Jeff," the deputy said, harshly. "And I'd admire it if you'd come peaceably."

"But what the hell do you want me for, Turner?" Jeff protested. "What am I supposed to have done?"

Turner shifted the quid in his mouth, then spat out words in the same forceful manner with which he expelled tobacco juice.

"Murder! And robbery! We found poor Rab Martin's body right where you left it this afternoon. Shot through the heart and robbed of every cent."

Jeff couldn't have been more stunned if a sledge had struck him in the face. For a moment he was incapable of thought or action. Rab Martin dead! Then dead were his hopes of saving the ranch and exposing Carter's duplicity.

After an endless moment he became aware of the ring of accusing faces and tried to get a grip on himself. "Why me?" he asked Turner. "Why should you think I'd kill and rob Martin?"

Turner spat, contemptuously. "We don't think, we know. Three fellers saw you order Martin out of the saloon this morning at the point of a gun. We followed your trail, yours and his'n, to the fork in the road where you left him. You must have forgot your mare's got a split left front shoe."

"Of course I didn't forget that." Jeff's anger was beginning to rise and his voice with it. "When I left Martin he was alive and had his money with him. Damn it, Turner, you know I wouldn't do a thing like that."

Turner shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't of thought so, Jeff, if I hadn't seen the evidence. And didn't know how des'pret you are over losing your spread in that oil well gamble. Link Adams says you were sore at them oil fellers, too, and wanted to blame them for your troubles. So grab yourself some sky, Jeff, whilst I git your gun. You're under arrest."

Looking at that ring of unfriendly faces, Jeff knew he had already been tried and condemned. One suspicious move and he'd be riddled with lead. Almost mechanically he raised his hands to shoulder-level while the deputy stepped forward to take his gun.

At that instant the screen door to the house closed softly and Neva's voice reached them. It wasn't soft. It was sharp and business like.

"Drop your guns, everybody! And get down off those horses!"

They turned to stare at her, then reluctantly obeyed. The resolute look in her eyes and the steady way she held the rifle told them she wasn't bluffing. Somewhat sheepishly, but without argument, the men left their weapons on the ground and lined up against the wall.

"The first man moves gets lead in his back," the girl told them, coldly. "Jeff Marlow never killed anybody and you're not taking him in on a ridiculous and trumped up charge of murder!"

Without turning her head she spoke to Jeff. "Empty their guns and cartridge belts, Jeff, and get going. I'll hold them here till dark."

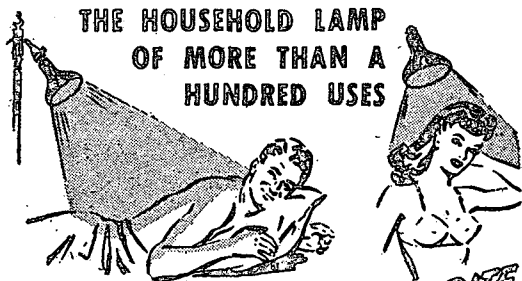
Jeff opened his mouth to refuse. He couldn't leave Neva holding the bag like that. Then an idea came to him. A few hours of freedom



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might accomplish what he and Martin had planned to do. He didn't hold a single high card but sometimes a bluff was just as good. With Neva believing in him he had something to fight for.

As he swung up into the saddle he called softly: "Thanks, Neva. I'll be seeing you soon."

"Keep going, Jeff," she urged. "And—you've no need to be jealous of Brent any more."

HE HAD ridden off in the opposite direction to Post City but out of sight of the house he circled about and headed for town. He pushed the swift mare to her fastest speed and when he reached town he circled about to come up at the rear of the frame hotel where Brent Carter stayed. There were outside back stairs and Jeff left his horse ground hitched and went up the stairs quickly. He was in luck, for a light shone under the door of Carter's room. Flattening himself against the wall, Jeff waited.

He hadn't long to wait. In another moment the light winked out and then the door opened. Brent Carter came out, turning to lock the door behind him. Before he could turn the key Jeff's gun was boring into his back, his other hand reaching for Carter's gun.

"Let's take the back stairs," Jeff said softly. "And very quietly if you want to live to get to the bottom."

Carter stiffened. "What the hell you think you're doing, Marlow. They're hunting you for one murder now."

"But one I didn't do," Jeff told him. "However it'll be different in your case. I'll be guilty of this one."

He heard the driller catch his breath sharply. "Now let's be sensible, Jeff. You haven't got anything against me. If you've been listening to some fool idea of Rab Martin's—if he talked to you . . ."

"He talked," Jeff said curtly. "And I listened. I think you found that out, Carter. You must have followed us this morning and killed him to keep him from telling what he knows about that well. Only you put the cork in the bottle too late. Start walking!"

At the foot of the stairs Jeff prodded him roughly. "Now get your horse and we'll go straight to your warehouse. And don't forget what happens if we meet anybody and you give me away. I'm pulling the trigger at the first false move you make. Remember I'm a wanted man."

At the small corrugated iron warehouse Carter lit a lantern and unlocked the door. "Now what?" he asked, angrily.

"That nitro you use to blow in a well. Get it, Carter, and we'll head for the ranch."

Carter caught his drift then. "You're crazy

as hell!" he exploded. "I can't go stumbling around in the dark carrying nitroglycerin. There's enough in one of those cylinders to blow us both to hell and back."

"Then let her blow," Jeff said, coolly. "That's up to you. It makes small difference to me since I'll be hung for murder anyway."

Carter hesitated and Jeff prodded with the gun again. "You're hell bound, Carter. Just take your choice about roads."

With a sharp sigh the driller went over and opened a metal box. Inside its padded walls lay two cradled cylinders, each loaded with death. Gingerly he lifted one and carried it outside. Standing beside the horses he told Jeff: "Seems to me I hold the high cards now. Suppose I drop this thing? You'll be as dead as me."

"But no deader," Jeff reminded him. "And I don't think you'll drop it, Carter. Since we're handling death suppose we give ourselves a break by being sensible."

Carter offered no more trouble after that. It was a long, grueling trip to the well at the slow pace Jeff considered safe. The cylinder was heavy and Jeff didn't take chances on Carter's arms getting tired enough to drop their lethal burden. Several times he stopped and lifted the nitro down until the driller flexed his cramped muscles.

It was a harrowing experience, riding so close to death, and when the wooden derrick finally loomed up in the night Jeff slid to the ground with a shuddering sigh.

"We'll have to wait till daylight," he told his prisoner. "You can sleep tied to that tree. And don't snore loud enough to jar that nitro."

AS SOON as it was daylight Jeff stood up and stretched his tired legs. Across the pasture a bare half mile he could see smoke from the chimney of the house. That meant breakfast and his mouth watered at the thought of strong coffee. He wondered what the posse would do to Neva. The thought made him rough as he untied Carter and prodded him to his feet.

"Get busy. You know what to do. Remember, no tricks!"

But he wasn't worrying too much about Carter. No man feels tricky with a gallon of nitro in his hands. So when the driller finally yelled, "Look out! She's going to blow!" Jeff joined Carter in a sprint for the woods. There they waited, breathlessly.

At first they felt, rather than heard, the deep rumbling down in the earth nearly two thousand feet. Rapidly it turned into a sibilant hissing that seemed to fill all the world with weird sounds. Then suddenly a column of thick, black liquid shot into the air.

For a long, wordless moment the men stared

at the gusher, reveling in the music of its dull roar. Then Carter turned to Jeff:

"Well, Marlow, there's your well. But I don't think it's going to do you any good. You don't hold the high card now. That gun of yours isn't much good any longer. Fire it and see the whole works burn like hell. Ever see an oil well burn, Marlow? It's quite a sight and costs about a thousand dollars a minute. If you feel that rich go ahead and shoot."

Jeff hesitated, realizing the truth of what Carter said. Before he could do anything Carter bolted out. One foot shot into the air and Jeff landed in soft earth some distance away. Almost in the same movement, it seemed, Carter's arm shot out, too, and his fist buried itself in Jeff's stomach. Jeff folded, feeling all the air rushing out of his lungs.

Carter followed his advantage with a short upper cut to Jeff's chin that carried the kick of a mule. Jeff went down, but he retained enough presence of mind to roll as he fell. That took him out of reach of the brutal kick Carter aimed at his head and gave him a chance to get to his feet, though winded and gasping with pain. Carter closed in, hard fists swinging, voice taunting.

"Think I'm going to let you drag me off to jail with a fortune like that waiting? No much, Marlow. I'm going to leave you like I left Martin, only more messed up. I can claim self defense and they'll believe me. Then I can marry Neva and still get it all."

Jeff knew the other was trying to goad him into senseless frenzy. He did feel the first black wave of panic as a hard fist rocked him again and when he hit back there was nothing there to hit. Jeff was no fighter, and knew it. This grinning, taunting devil knew all the tricks and was able to keep out of Jeff's way at the same time that he was pummeling him unmercifully.

Before long the fight had carried them close to the spouting gusher of crude oil and the slimy stuff rained over them and the gasses burned and choked their throats and lungs so that both were gasping and wheezing as they fought.

Carter began tiring and Jeff pushed his advantage. He stopped aiming for the driller's head and face and began raining body blows that sharpened the other's breath to a harsh whistle. Carter started backing up before Jeff's steady slugging. He stumbled over a pile of casing and Jeff let go a jaw breaker that was meant to flatten Carter out. It would have if it had landed but at that second Jeff stepped in a pool of slippery oil. His feet shot out from under him and he went down on his back.

Before he could roll over to get to his feet

Carter was coming at him again. And now he held a murderous weapon in his hand—a short length of one inch steel cable. He was swinging it like a club and Jeff knew he was staring at death. That steel rope would split his head like a ripe melon, or crush an arm if he fended the blow.

He hadn't time to think. Only to act. As Carter rushed he raised both feet close to his chest, then let go with piston driving force. They caught Carter in the groin, sent him bowling over in pain. The lashing cable end struck harmlessly a scant few inches from Jeff's head.

Rolling over, Jeff threw himself on Carter before the driller could straighten up. With every ounce of strength he had left he rained blows on Carter's face and body until he began begging for mercy. But there was no mercy left in Jeff and he only felt a fierce exultation in seeing the other man weaken.

HE DIDN'T even hear the shouts of men or the sounds of horses until rough hands jerked him off his moaning enemy, and Cy Turner's voice demanded to know what was going on. With a shaking hand Jeff tried to wipe the smeary oil from his face enough to clear his vision. When he did, he saw the posse were all there, and Neva with them. She was staring in unbelievable wonder at the roaring gusher, unmindful of the ruin it was making of her clothes.

Cy Turner looked close to be sure the begrimed figure he saw was Jeff. "What you trying to do, commit another murder? Dang your hide, Jeff, I been tailing you all night and went back to the house this morning figuring you'd try to see the girl again. We saw the gusher and got here jest in time..."

"That's right, Cy," Jeff put in wearily. "Just in time to arrest Martin's murderer. And Buck's too, I think. Ask him if he didn't trail Buck to Red Rock and kill him to get that ten thousand so we couldn't pay off Adams. And so he could buy us out before he brought in this well." He made a threatening gesture towards the beaten driller.

The slimy, oil smeared figure on the ground moaned and moved slightly. As Jeff towered over him he seemed trying to crawl under the pool of crude in which he lay. "Keep him off," he begged. "I killed both of them and I'll confess."

"Get up and shut that well off first," Jeff ordered. "Then Cy can have you."

Jeff went to stand by Neva, feeling her hand slip into his. She looked up at him, her face radiant though splattered with oil, but still the most beautiful face in the whole State of Oklahoma. Jeff knew he had lost a sister but gained a wife.

The Devil Said, "Wait!"

By Jhan Robbins

Slowly the half-wild creature crawled toward Fort Kiowa. Ferocious eyes blazed in a shattered skull. Shreds of clothing hung in tatters. Clawlike hands were raised in supplication. . . . Trapper Hugh Glass was coming home!



Hugh fought as he had never fought before.

ON HANDS and knees a creature—half man, half animal—crawled slowly across a field of stubble grass and painfully came to rest in the shadows of the log stockade around Fort Kiowa.

Shreds of clothing hung in tatters from the thin, bony frame. Through rents in the trousers red, swolled knobs of knees stuck out. Wild eyes gleamed in a face that was thinned down to the skull. His wirey beard

was tangled with blood-matted hair, his clawlike hands raised in supplication, and his back was laid open from shoulder to waist.

It was no wonder men gathered around Hugh Glass and asked, "Can this be a man?"

But Hugh Glass was all man. The odds on the Fort Kiowa Trail stood at a thousand to one that he'd shove over the Great Divide. He should have died of injuries. He should have starved to death. He should have been

devoured by the mountain wolves. He should have been finished off by hostile Indians. Instead, he leaned his raw back against the stockade and gasped out his astounding story.

The high border country north and west of the Dakotas was marked "unexplored territory" on the maps of the 1820's. Hugh Glass was a member of an expedition that climbed into the mountains under the leadership of U.S. Army Major Andrew Henry.

They were looking for peltry. They found it, but it was still wrapped around a very bad-tempered grizzly bear. Hugh Glass was scouting with a friend—Etienne Provot, who later gave his name to Provo, Utah—when they ran into the found hundred pound lady with two very young cubs.

Hugh Glass raised his rifle and fired at close range. The shot creased the bear's hide. The animal started for Glass and he grabbed his companion's rifle—Provot was frozen to the spot—and fired again, but the bear came for him. The mountaineer was hurled to the ground by the blow of a mighty paw. He looked up into the wicked mouth and then he was gathered into the animal's bone-crushing hug, the long claws ripping into his back.

The grizzly dropped Glass and started for her cubs. Then she made for Provot, but just as she reached for him, the two bullet wounds and the knife took effect and the half-ton animal crashed to the ground.

Glass was barely breathing and every breath was pain. His arms and legs were bleeding from a dozen jagged scratches, his spine was wrenched and the bear's teeth had fastened into his shoulder as the claws had ploughed down his back.

But he stubbornly breathed on, the air rattling in his throat. His fellows administered all the crude restoratives they knew, then built a camp and waited for him to die.

After three days they grew tired of waiting and left. They drew lots to choose two who would stay and bury him. One of those who "lost" was Jim Bridger and the other a man named Fitzgerald.

Glass lay unconscious, unchanging for three days. Then his two companions packed up, hit the trail of the main party, and reported Glass dead and buried.

On the fourth day, the supposed corpse stirred. His shifting weight tumbled him down hill to a small stream, where he drank a great deal of very cold water. Then he ate some berries and went back to sleep. When he awoke again, he started back to Fort Kiowa, a hundred miles away, cursing his erstwhile comrades at every agonizing inch.

His back was injured so that it was impossible for him to stand erect. He had to crawl. When he was lucky, he made two full

miles a day. He managed to bathe and bind the slashes on his arms and legs, but he could not reach the one on his back. After a few days the wound became infected and maggoty. The irritation they caused, added to his torture, but the worms probably saved his life. At least, they saved him from gangrene.

He lived on water and wild fruit, but his great exertions and his wounds ebbed his strength. He was starving.

ONE night as he slept fitfully in the damp, he heard wolves and awoke suddenly. Cringing under a bush, he watched three half-grown animals drag down a buffalo calf. He waited until they had eaten their fill and lay, stuffed and panting, beside their prey. Then he crept out and shouted and flapped his scarecrow arms. The wolves fled, and Hugh Glass, who was by then half-wolf himself, threw his body against the still warm carcass and ripped and clawed the fresh meat.

He was out in prairie country now. It was hot and dry. He suffered terribly from thirst and there were fewer and fewer berry bushes. He caught little gray lizards and crunched them whole. He ate the green grass but his stomach brought it up.

He was only fifteen miles from the fort, and he scanned the horizon every minute watching eagerly for a scouting cavalry unit. One morning he saw a rider through the tall grass. He screamed weakly and waved his arms, but the horseman vanished over a rolling slope without seeing him.

A week later Glass broke into the smooth half mile of ground that hemmed the stockade, and there before him was Fort Kiowa. Hugh Glass had come back.

The strange and terrible homeward trek took him six weeks. Just six weeks later, he was on his feet again. The kinks in his back were pulled out, his wounds closed, his powerful frame re-muscled.

Rugged Jim Bridger was telling a long, tall story to his friend Fitzgerald, who was laughing heartily. The laughter died in his throat, and a faint gurgle came out instead. Before him stood Hugh Glass. A wrathful, revengeful Hugh Glass, terrible in his fury.

While Bridger paled and Fitzgerald whined for forgiveness and stumbled over explanations, Glass cursed them both, up down and sideways. He called them every name he knew and a few he had thought up on the death trail from the Montana mountains to Fort Kiowa.

He paused for breath, and glared at them contemptuously. Then he pounded his great chest.

"You shouldn't ought to of done that to me, boys," he said, "I might have died!"



The guns in the stranger's hands roared.

Killers' Cattle-Drive

By Ed Earl Repp

Chapter I

DEATH TRAIL

SIXTEEN hours of heat and dust and the constant bawling of thirsty cattle lay behind the TL trail crew. Tin plates were heaped with food from the chuckwagon. Half a dozen tired punchers relaxed about the campfire, wolfing down their meal and drinking cups of scalding black Arbuckle. The day's

toil was over, though for some there would be a turn at night-herding the two thousand longhorns bedded down out there beyond the flickering shadows.

Tom Lincoln rolled up in his blanket, his pale eyes heavy with drowsiness. Now and then he could hear the low, soothing notes from Jep Shinn's fiddle, as the waddy circled the herd and played in the darkness. Tom liked that, and in all his seventeen years he had never been more contented. This was a



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When Tom Lincoln finally found the scarfaced murderer he had sought so long, he knew that the cards were stacked against him, and instead of roaring Dodge City at trail's end, he'd meet the same bitter fate as had his cowman dad—a bullet in the back from a gunman no one could kill!

man's job and he was holding his own with the best of them.

The exciting thought that this was the second TL herd heading up the Chisholm Trail this spring churned idly in his mind. Every cent that Big Tom Lincoln, his father, owned was tied up in these two drives to Dodge. And so were the savings of their neighbors.

Young Tom kept thinking about the cautious talk that had floated about the coast country. "No trail drive is safe this year. No herd will reach Dodge in one piece. Denver Devon'll see to that!"

These rumors had proved to be groundless. They'd encountered no trouble on the trip.

Tom suddenly pushed the blanket back and scrambled to his feet. He had bedded down too close to the fire and he was getting uncomfortably warm. The leather leggings on his long, bowed legs were caked with dust, and the fire's flickering light played over his boyish, freckled face. He stooped over to move the blanket to a cooler spot.

His hand never touched it. He froze there, motionless, staring at the man who crouched in the shadows, a stranger with hate-filled, gleaming eyes. The entire side of his mahogany-hued face twisted into a devil's mask by a livid, puckered scar that ran from cheek to neck.

The guns in the stranger's hands roared, and Tom felt hot-lead pluck at his clothing. A leaden fuscillade poured into the camp. Tom realized that he and his companions were surrounded by many men, as he flung himself to the ground, guns in hands.

"Douse the fire!" he yelled, but he knew it was too late.

He emptied his guns at the elusive shadow before him, sensing that his bullets laced the night without touching his prey. In his brain burned that one brief image of that horrible disfigured face. Back of him he heard the bitter screams of his dying friends.

For one dreadful moment Tom thought of his father out there with the herd. Then a sledge-hammer blow struck him in the head, and he slid helplessly to the ground. He managed to lift a hand to his temple, and his fingers came away wet and sticky. His vision suddenly dimmed. And through the gathering mist he saw that horrible face again.

Then it faded, and everything was black. . . .

TOM was awakened by the far-away sound of voices, and he heard spurs jingle as men walked about him. He realized that it was morning as the sun's bright rays burned into his body. The trail herd was on the move. Why wasn't he with it?

Slowly the truth edged its way through the haze that blanketed his mind. Once more he was staring at that scarfaced devil and watching his friends die before those flaming guns. He shuddered and slowly opened his eyes.

Tall, lanky men stalked about the gutted camp, moving from one still body to another. Their dust-caked jackets and leggings and wide brimmed sombreros showed evidence of a hard trail behind them. Each grim faced man had two guns strapped to his hips.

A wild cry burst from Tom's parched lips as realization came to him. *Texas Rangers!*

Those grim faces gathered around him. "Captain Barr," one of them called. "Here's a lad they must have overlooked!"

A tall, gray haired man hurried up to the group. He took one look at Tom and sank to his knees beside him. Both anger and pity were in his eyes, and his big hands were gentle as a woman's as he examined Tom's scalp. "The lad's been bleeding for hours," he swore softly. "Shot down with the rest of them and left for dead. If we work fast he may be saved!"

"Dad—the trail crew?" Tom asked weakly. Captain Barr's seamed face mirrored his compassion. "They died last night, son," he said. "Your herd's gone, too."

It took time for the sickening knowledge to register in Tom's brain. A dull, hopeless anger stirred within him. His father and his

friends gone! And two thousand longhorns upon which so many people back home were dependent. His father had been so proud of their trust. They were so near to success and then just overnight. . . .

Tom watched a Ranger ride out to intercept a trailherd that hove into sight. A stripped down chuck wagon raced out of the dust pall that marked the drive and pulled up in the wreckage of the TL camp within a few minutes.

As Tom was gently lifted into the wagon, he could see the bodies of his friends. Back there out of sight would be his father. Jep Shinn was there, too, and his beloved fiddle. The smashed TL chuck wagon canted crazily to one side amidst its gutted contents, mute evidence of last night's savage attack.

The Rangers were already busy digging graves. Tom sank back in the wagon, bitter eyed and sick inside.

Pain stabbed at him, as his wound was washed with whiskey. The bullet had scraped a deep furrow above his temple. The bandage had been applied when Captain Barr climbed into the wagon bed, carrying the two hand tooled gunbelts with the walnut butted Peacemakers in their ornate holsters. He laid them beside Tom.

"I found them beside your father," Barr murmured. "I thought you'd want to keep them."

Tom stared at the guns. They were all he had left of his father, except the memory of his honest, trusting ways.

Then Barr was back in his role of Ranger again. "We rode to warn you last night. We knew trouble was dogging this trail. What happened?"

It was an effort to speak, but Tom told his story. Captain Barr nodded his head as it was finished.

"Scarface Bauman! He stole cows in the past. This year he's wiping out whole outfits."

"I'd know him anywhere," Tom muttered. "I vow that I will kill him!"

Barr shook his head. "I know how you feel, son, but it'll only mean a quick boothill grave. Scarface Bauman has met some of the best gunslicks in this country. They're all dead. Why don't you leave him to us Rangers?"

The first light-headed touches of fever were licking at Tom's brain. He didn't bother to answer the Ranger captain. His mind was filled with a horrible, scarfaced monster. Suddenly everything went black.

ONE week later Tom Lincoln was prowling about the little cowtown of Fort Worth. His father's guns were strapped about his lean hips, and always he searched the faces of the strangers he met. Before him always the taunting image of that scarfaced devil

and the wanton slaughter of the TL trail crew.

It all seemed like a horrible dream. Every night when he went to sleep he vowed to awaken the next morning to find himself out on the trail with his father's crew. Instead he always found himself sitting up in bed in a cold sweat, seeing again the face of that hideous renegade.

A decision had blossomed in Tom's mind on the morning that Captain Barr stopped him on the street near Ranger headquarters. "You look as if you could sit in a saddle again," Barr said. "Ever thought about joining the Rangers?"

The sudden offer dazzled Tom. "I know you're aching to line sights on Scarface Bauman," the captain continued. "If you're riding with us, you may get the chance. I've just got orders from Austin to lay everything else aside until we bring Bauman in."

Tom's long, brown fingers slipped around the gunbutts at his hips. "There was a time when I'd of jumped at the chance to be a Ranger," he said. "Now I reckon I can do better on my own. I'll make my own law, just as Scarface Bauman does. But I ain't forgetting your offer, Captain Barr—and many thanks." Then, hesitantly, "You reckon I could borrow a horse and some supplies?"

A faint grin bent Barr's lips. "There's no stopping you, is there, son?" He chuckled softly. "Damned if I wouldn't do it the same way if I were in your shoes. You're welcome to any horse we've got, and all the food and ammunition you can carry. I hope you're the top man when Bauman and you tangle!"

Chapter II

CAMP OF THE DAMNED

TEN miles south of the Red, Tom Lincoln reined his big buckskin off the hoof-marked trail. His mouth tightened to a bitter line as he looked down at the row of unmarked graves under the cottonwoods. The only monument

on the spot was the gutted chuck wagon and the few trampled personal effects scattered in the dirt.

Savagely he jerked the buckskin around and drove home his spurs. So much time had been lost. Scarface Bauman would probably drive this second TL herd up the trail to Dodge. Eager buyers there wouldn't question too closely the proof of ownership.

Thought of Dodge brought Tom's recent decision to the fore—the knowledge that the coast country rumors might be true—that Denver Devon, the man who had loaned the ranchers money to get their herds to market, might be the man behind the ruthless raid. Devon stood to gain a great deal if the ranchers lost their herds—they had all put up their ranches for security. And if this were true, up in Dodge, old Elijah Vance and his daughter, Lana, would be in great danger—for they would have sold the first TL herd. They even might now be riding back to Texas with the money.

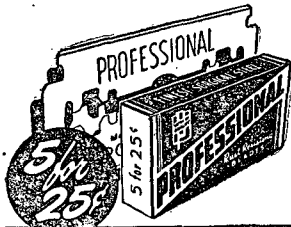
Denver Devon would see that they never got back home with it. It was up to Tom to warn them of their danger.

Powdered with dust, shoulders humped forward against the summer heat, Tom heard the gunfire and the hoarse shouts around the bend of the brushy trail ahead. The quick pound of hoofs came to him, and the rattle and bang of a fast-moving wagon. Quickly he eased the buckskin into the thickets hemming the trail.

A span of big Missouri mules flashed into view, pulling a light, bouncing wagon behind. Tom got a quick look at the big man laying a whip along the team's backs; he saw the girl, too, holding onto the wagon seat, bright hair streaming back in the wind. Behind them Tom saw a band of pursuing riders. They loomed through the swirling dust clouds like avenging heat devils.

The girl turned the trick. Tom eased his horse back into the trail, and his guns were hammering in his hands. There were four

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riders, and three of their mounts crashed to the ground. The lone remaining rider jerked his horse to a halt, then cut into the brush out of sight.

The unhorsed men were now scrambling to their feet. Sudden bewilderment slid over Tom's face as he recognized them. Those men were part of the first TL trail crew!

More hoofbeats sounded from around the bend. The TL men unlimbered their guns, and lead sang dangerously close to Tom. He held his fire as six riders pounded into view. They turned their guns on the TL waddies. The three men crumpled into the dust, riddled with bullets.

A grinning youngster lingered long enough to yell, "Better tuck in yore tail and ride, cowboy! They's more of those Texas warthogs comin' up behind!"

More riders sped around the bend, and sunlight glinted brightly on their guns. Their lead was coming close.

There was nothing for Tom to do but follow the strangers he had aided. Sawing on the reins, he sent the big buckskin streaking down the trail after them.

In Tom's mind was one firm conviction: He had to cast his lot with these men. For the girl in the wagon was Lana Vance, and the man at the reins was Scarface Bauman.

Lana sat in a saddle, her hands securely tied. She wore a denim shirt, tight-fitting Levis, and tooled boots. Despite the anger that blazed in her blue eyes, she was even prettier than Tom remembered.

"Thanks, young fellow," Bauman said, swinging astride a long legged Morgan. "Those curly wolves would've tied a knot in my tail but for you. I'm obliged."

"You murderer!" Lana spat at Tom. "Helping these scum to rob and kill innocent men!"

Her voice was heavy with anger, and she was perilously close to tears. But there was a hidden warning in her eyes, and Tom was thankful that she chose to hide his identity.

Cherokee Poe, a half-breed Indian, now guided the gang, leading them deeper and deeper into the rough country. Long Tom Yarber, a hard faced oldster, and Bud Skene, the youngster with the old-wise eyes, brought up the rear with Tom. All of them rode with hands on guns, tempers set for hair-trigger action. They were of the border breed, riding a defiant trail to hell, daring anybody to try and stop them.

Finally the half-breed jerked his sweating mount to a stop and lolled in the saddle, his upraised coppery hand halting the gang.

"Lost them," Bauman chuckled. "Now we circle into camp after dark, and we're safe."

His shaggy head swiveled about, and his probing eyes were wary as he looked at Tom. His men did likewise. Tom felt the involun-

tary tightening of his belly muscles, and he inched his hands nearer his guns.

"We're safe unless..." Bauman said softly, and there was no mistaking the implication.

"Hell, Bauman, give the lad a chance," Bud Skene jeered with the cocksureness of youth. "He took those Texans off yore tail, didn't he?"

"He could of made a mistake."

Then Bauman asked bluntly. "Did you?"

Tom answered truthfully. "Yes. But I'd of done the same thing if I knew better. I'm riding the same kind of trail you are."

They had to believe him, he vowed. He'd make them believe him. If he could ride into camp with them, he'd find a way to square his score with this scarfaced renegade.

Bauman's thick lips flattened over yellow teeth in an evil grin. "You were coming up the Chisholm. Maybe dodging trouble down Texas way?"

"I argued with an hombre over a horse. I had to kill him," Tom said steadily.

Bauman's level gaze beat steadily against Tom for endless seconds. Finally he nodded his head. "Okay, Texas, you're in. You know better'n to try to deal yourself out, I hope. Each man gets an even share of our take. What's your name?"

"I'm in," Tom agreed. "Just call me Texas."

Bauman was lying, he knew. The man was too greedy to be so generous to a stranger. Sooner or later...

Whirling his Morgan, Bauman rode down the side of the ridge, and the gang fell in behind him.

Bud Skene reined in beside Tom, and sober thought replaced the former cockiness on his face. They rode in silence until Bud spoke. "You don't look like an owlhooter to me, Texas. And Bauman ain't no fool. Take my advice, and smoke yore pony out of here now, before it's too late."

"I'm sticking," was Tom's brief comment.

Chapter III

FIST MEDICINE

THE thin horn of a new moon was rising over the black hills when they topped the ridge overlooking a small valley, and Tom saw the tiny squares that were lights in the distance. "See you at my place," Bauman said, riding ahead into the darkness, taking Lana with him.

Tom growled deep in his throat and started to follow them. Then, remembering that his life was forfeit if he aroused the gang's distrust, he swung back into their midst.

As they neared the shimmering lights, Tom's amazement grew. He saw a collection of log buildings and pole corrals, and the light breeze

that touched his face brought the sound of cattle from the flats beyond the lights. From the largest building came the ribald voices of several men, followed by the shrill laughter of a woman.

"Helltown, we call it," Bud Skene boasted, as they dismounted at a long, rambling shed that passed for a barn. Bud's eyes gleamed. "There's no law in the Nations, and we got less than that here. Better shuck them guns, Texas, unless you're right handy with 'em."

They left their tired ponies with the stable attendant, with orders to give them a good rub-down and feed. Spurs jingling, they walked past the cabins until Bud halted before one on the outskirts of the camp.

At Bud's knock, they were admitted into a big, crudely furnished room. The walls were lined with bunks, and one corner of the room served as a kitchen. Tom saw at a glance. Through an open door, he saw another room in the rear.

Lana was busy over a stove, and the smell of frying bacon filled the cabin. She looked around at their entrance, raised a flour caked hand and pushed her long hair out of her flushed face. Her eyes were cold and unforgiving, and there was a defiant proudness about her that touched Tom's heart.

"Keep away from the girl, Texas!" Bauman cautioned harshly. "That goes for everyone. I'm only telling you once."

Lana looked steadily at Tom, and he tried to read the appeal in her eyes. Bauman saw that look, and his eyes blazed dangerously.

"She means nothing to me," Tom said, stretching his lanky body out in a bunk.

Cherokee Poe dug out a pack of greasy cards, and soon everybody was crowded around a table, except Bud Skene.

"What'll happen to the girl?" Tom asked casually.

Bud's eyes clouded. His fingers closed like a vise on Tom's arm. "Mister," he muttered softly, "you better tuck in your shirt tail before Bauman yanks it off. He's always kept a girl around—and nobody ever fools with 'em. Watch your step. He don't cotton to you one bit."

The first grin in days creased Tom's unshaven face. He liked Bud. The way the youngster was trying to warn him was amusing—and serious.

"I don't like Bauman either," Tom drawled. "I'll talk to the girl when I want to. I'll keep out of trouble unless Bauman starts it."

Bud declared, "That'll be the end of your troubles. I ain't scared of any man's guns—except Bauman's. The man ain't human, Texas. You'll find that out."

"I take my worries as they come," Tom answered. "There's only one end to the trail I'm riding."

"Don't say you ain't been warned." Bud edged into the group about the poker game.

TOM wondered, how would this thing end. He let his mind go back over the past weeks, and his black thoughts brought that everpresent anger flooding over him again. There at the poker table sat Scarface Bauman, the man who had wiped out an entire trail crew, and, probably, in the flats behind the cabin was the stolen TL herd. Tom could pull his guns and easily kill Bauman before the others could stop him.

He shut the thought out. There was Lana to consider—and equally important—the task of finding out if anyone had hired Bauman to prey upon the TL herds. He had to find out if Denver Devon was in this swindle.

The card game broke up for the meal, and the gang wolfed their food down hungrily. Tom stared at Lana, as she moved about serving them, and felt a fury within him at sight of her drawn, tired face.

When no one was watching, she winked meaningly toward the back room, then turned away to the stove. The hot blood pounded back of Tom's eyes. She wanted to talk to him. It was an effort to control himself, for he knew how much he'd been wanting to speak to her.

After the empty dishes were cleared off the table, Bauman divided the money in the saddle bags among his men, and the poker game went on. Tom didn't look at his share. Stowing it in his bunk, he stepped softly outside. No one paid him any attention.

He circled to the back of the cabin and took a position outside the single barred window of Lana's room. The tension inside him kept mounting. He rolled a smoke, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

It was past midnight, yet the noise and revelry in this outlaw camp was growing louder. The moon rode the starry heavens on the other side of the cabin, leaving Tom in transparent shadow. He tried to put the growing premonition of danger out of his mind.

Light bloomed in the window for an instant, then winked off. Tom heard the soft scuffle of footsteps. Lana's white face was a blur in the shadows. He reached his hand through the bars to touch her, and felt the wet tears on her cheeks. He stood there speechless until her low sobs ceased, feeling the pressure of her soft fingers on his arm.

"I—I'm sorry, Tom," she said at last. "Everything seems so hopeless."

Tom whispered softly, "I'll get you out of here. What happened on the trail? Where's your father?"

Lana's words came raggedly and so low that he had to lean forward to hear them. "We sold the herd last week. Dad and I and some of the men started down the trail to Texas

this morning. These outlaws attacked us. They shot down two men—and dad. They got away when you . . .”

“When I horned in and ruined everything,” he said bitterly. “I’m sorry, Lana. I didn’t know.” He smoothed her soft hair back from her face, and she didn’t stop him. “I’ll tell you my story.”

His voice grew hard and cold as he described the attack on the trail herd. Lana was sobbing under her breath when he finished. “The beasts!” she cried. “If only there was something I could do.”

“There is,” Tom said. “You can help—”

Heavy footsteps sounded behind him, and, as Tom spun about, Bauman’s furious words split the night like daggers.

“I warned you about the girl, Texas!”

Bauman pounced on him like a huge black panther. Twisting to one side, Tom rolled with the huge fist that grazed his ribs, feeling Bauman’s hot breath in his face. He heard Lana’s low scream behind him. His pent-up hatred for Bauman gusted through him like a white hot flame.

He brought his right fist up from below his knees with blinding speed and landed it squarely on Bauman’s jaw, knowing it was the hardest punch he’d ever thrown. The shock of it numbed his hand and traveled the length of his arm. The blow didn’t slow Bauman one bit. He shook his shaggy head and kept coming.

Brutal triumph gleamed in Bauman’s eyes. “I warned you, Texas,” he said again. “I’ll break every bone in your damn body.”

Tom’s fist stabbed a rapid one-two in the giant’s belly, and the threats ended in a grunt. Those punches bounced off that slab-muscled body as if it were made of post oak. Apprehension built up fast within him. Outweighed fifty pounds, he had no more chance of whipping Bauman in a fistfight than he’d have in tackling a grizzly bear barehanded. Already he was breathing in hoarse, rasping gasps, trying to suck air into his straining lungs. His only chance was to stay out of reach of those bear-like arms, to wear the man down to his size before really slugging it out with him.

Bauman’s looping blows were damaging, too. Tom’s left eye was puffing shut, and he tasted the warm, salty blood from a rip across his lower lip. One of Bauman’s fists smashed against his chest, and Tom bit down on his torn lip to stop the cry that formed in his throat.

Desperation brought a certain clarity to Tom’s mind. He was tiring fast, and Bauman knew it. As the giant came at him again, Tom staggered to one side, and, as Bauman plunged past, Tom’s right hand came down and one of his Peacemakers was in it. The long barrel

slashed suddenly against the back of Bauman’s head. The man went to the ground like a shot steer.

He sprawled there on hands and knees, swaying uncertainly, trying to get to his feet, and Tom felt sick at the sound of the animal-like whimperings that came from the man’s battered lips.

Suddenly, Bauman pitched forward on his face, out cold, and Tom drew a long, shuddering breath. The next time would not be this easy!

Chapter IV

FLIGHT FROM HELLTOWN

THE fight had brought the gang crowding around. “I didn’t kill him,” Tom muttered, weaving unsteadily in his tracks, but the gun in his hand did not waver. “Throw some water on him and he’ll be okay.”

Cherokee Poe and a comrade dragged Bauman to a nearby horse trough and dumped his head and shoulders into the water. As Tom slid his gun into its holster, he was aware that every muscle in his body ached, and his ribs were so sore it was an effort to breathe.

“You lucky fool,” Bud Skene said admiringly. “You’re the first hombre ever to down Bauman in a fight. Don’t let him ever catch you talking to his girl again.”

Yarber placed a friendly hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Get out of this camp right now. Don’t let Bauman see you again. That’s good advice, son. He’ll come at you with his six-gun next time, and Wyatt Earp himself couldn’t beat Bauman’s draw!”

Tom walked around to the front of the cabin and saw that it was empty. Slipping inside, he doused the light in the lantern on the table, softly calling Lana’s name as he did so.

She came into the room, and ran into his open arms. He held her tight against him for one breathless moment, feeling the slimness and softness of her.

“Follow me,” he whispered.

Outside, there was no one in sight, and the revelry in the big saloon drowned any noise they made, as they crept behind it, then slid along the log wall to the front. A saddled horse stood hip-shot at the hitch-rail, and Tom knew his luck was running high, for this was what he had hoped to find.

It was a moment’s work to untie the animal and lead it into the deeper shadow of the saloon wall, where Tom put Lana into the saddle and adjusted the stirrups to suit her booted feet.

“The Chisholm’s due east of here,” he said, staring up into her taut face. “You ought to reach it by daylight. If you don’t find what’s left of our crew, ride into Dodge and tell the

authorities. They'll know how to handle this."

Lana leaned down, and in the shadow her eyes were dark pools. She spoke, and anxiety rode her words. "What about you, Tom? What will happen—if I don't get help here in time?"

"I don't know," he admitted, and he put out of his mind the visions of what he might be giving up. He kissed her then for the first time.

She straightened in the saddle and put spurs to the horse. Tom stood there watching her disappear into the night, and all that she left with him was the sound of her muffled sobs, and the memory of the warmth and softness of her lips.

BAUMAN'S men were still gathered about their leader, when Tom edged out of the shadows into their midst. The giant sat there in the moonlight, his wet shirt plastered to his body, the water that dripped from his clothing worming dark patches on the ground under his massive haunches. Unintelligible growls came from his battered lips, and he wagged his head slowly from side to side, trying to shake off the stupor that held him in its grip.

He looked up, and his yellow eyes blazed like live coals at sight of Tom Lincoln. He struggled to his feet, and no man in that

little huddle offered him a hand. There was that in Bauman's twisted face that caused them to draw back from him.

All of them except Tom Lincoln. For this was the thing Tom knew he must face. He had gambled his life on his ability to meet this test, and, though a cold sweat beaded his forehead and caused his shirt to stick clammy to his ribs, he welcomed another encounter with Bauman. This time guns would fill their hands, and bullets would decide their argument, and Big Tom Lincoln might chuckle quietly in his lonely grave, knowing that the gun magic he had bequeathed to his only son had been a remote means of retribution.

If Scarface Bauman was as deadly as they said he was? Tom tried to put the thought out of his mind.

"You talked to the girl against my orders," Bauman mumbled. "You whipped me in a fight, Texas, but you made one mistake. You didn't finish me when I was down. I ain't forgetting, and I'm settling with you soon's this lick on my head is healed."

"Any time," Tom said, feeling the tension run out of him. "Any time at all, Bauman."

He turned to the horse trough and let water run over his own bruised face, and by that action failed to see the wonder and the respect



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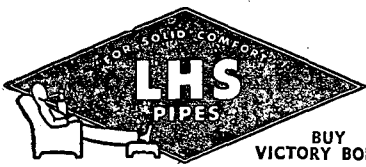
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with which the outlaw gang was regarding him. Bauman saw those looks, and the knowledge that he had lost caste with his men was written on his bloody face. Pushing through them, he strode around the cabin, entered the front door and lit the lantern.

The man's furious cursing came to Tom then, and Tom knew that he had discovered Lana's disappearance. Drying his face on the blue bandana that he took from about his neck, he joined Bud Skene and Long Tom Yarber as they moved back into the cabin.

Bauman met them at the door. A growling, berserk Bauman, who slammed a gun into Tom's lean belly and held it there with shaky force. "The girl, Texas! She ain't here. What did you do with her? Tell me the truth or, so help me, I'll blow you in two!"

Tom Lincoln would never be nearer death, and he knew it. "Why blame me if she's gone?" he evaded. "I've been here ever since our scrap. Bud'll back me on that."

"Yeah," Bud said. "He's tellin' it straight, Bauman." And Tom felt a bond building between him and this wise-old youngster, who unhesitatingly lied for him.

The anger and the purpose did not leave Bauman. "You're both lying," he snarled. "I don't believe one word of it."

"You're calling me a liar, boss." Bud Skene's little body held a cat-like tenseness. "Either start smokin' that gun or put it away. I take that kind of talk from no man. Not even you."

"Bauman. Oh, Bauman!"

The swift urgency behind that cry startled Bauman. It stopped the death that blazed in his eyes, and it caused him to peer over Tom's head into the moonlit shadows that concealed the speaker.

"Devon's here," the voice cried again. "He just rode in from Dodge, and he brought in the yellow-haired gal that you took to your place tonight. Said he caught her tryin' to escape."

Chapter V

THE WOLF PACK FIGHTS

DENVER DEVON! Here at Helltown! The knowledge and the certainty that it brought to Tom were tempered by the news that Lana was again a captive in this outlaw camp. If he could, he intended to kill Devon and Bauman, but the girl must be saved first.

Bauman eased the gun hammer down on the firing pin, as he slid the weapon into its holster. "The girl will tell me," he said. "So help me, if either of you helped her get away..."

He rolled through the door and vanished in the gloom. Tom saw that he was heading

toward the saloon, and knew that Denver Devon must be waiting for him there.

Tom walked into the darkness outside the cabin. Bud Skene followed him. "Don't ever turn your back on Cherokee," he warned, as they made their way to the saloon. "He can put that knife of his through a man's skull at thirty paces. I've seen the red devil do it."

"I won't," Tom promised, and he toyed with the thought of trying to enlist this outlaw kid's loyalty. Bud made it easier for him by asking a frank question.

"What's this all about, Texas? I ain't blind, and neither's the rest of us. You may've sided us by accident out on the trail today, but you sure as hell tagged along on purpose. You can talk to me. They's no love lost between me and Bauman. What does that yellow haired girl mean to you?"

Tom told him everything. How he'd started on a vengeance trail after the massacre of his father's trail crew, how he'd seized at the opportunity to join Bauman's gang, the way he'd hurried Lana out of camp to safety, his suspicion that Denver Devon was probably behind the atrocities that would ruin so many people when the news reached the Texas coast country.

"I've got to try and get Lana away from here again," he wound up. "Then I'm facing Devon and Bauman with my dad's guns, and, if I'm lucky, I'm riding back home with the money that's needed down there."

They halted at the rear of the saloon, and the merry-making inside had not abated. "That's a mighty big order for one lone hombre to tackle," Bud said. "You'll need help, Texas."

"I could use some," Tom admitted.

"Count me in, and maybe Yarber. We been aimin' to cut loose from Bauman for some time. I stole my share of cows, Texas, but shootin' down helpless, sleepin' men ain't my trade. Yarber and me rode on that raid, and we helped run off your herd. That's it out there back of us. But we burned our powder at the sky, and we was plenty sick afterwards. Will you shake hands on it, Texas?"

Their calloused palms met, and it was done. They examined their guns and made their plans, and with youthful disregard of the danger that hovered over the camp, they talked too loud. An amused smile formed on the lean, coppery face of the shadowy wraith who had snaked up in the thicket behind them, so close that he could have reached out and almost touched them.

Cherokee Poe had news for Scarface Bauman!

AS Tom and Bud entered the open door of the saloon, trouble was laying a quick tension over the place. Bauman and Denver

Devon faced each other before the rough planking that passed for a bar, and by the dark scowls that twisted their faces, Tom knew they were quarreling. And knowing Devon's reputation for having a keen eye for a pretty woman, it wasn't hard to figure what the fuss was about.

Devon was as small as Bauman was big. His custom-cut range clothing was expensive, and it fit him like a glove. There was an arrogance and a sureness in his long, pointed face.

The outlaw gang was bunched behind Bauman, while Devon's half dozen men were gathered in a loose knot behind their boss, their hands close to their gun-butts, the wariness on their grim faces being silent proof of their dislike for this death trap in which they found themselves. Out-numbered three to one, they had small chance of getting out alive.

As Tom slid into the outlaws' midst, he was thankful that Devon hadn't seen him. The man might have seen through the shaggy hair and the sparse beard and the dirty, worn denims upon which he'd been depending for disguise. He looked about for Lana, and saw the bright glow of her hair before him. She was sitting dejectedly in a crude, hide-bottomed chair close to the two men at the bar.

"We made a bargain," Devon said silkily. "I'm holding you to it."

Bauman's big, yellowed teeth showed as his lips parted in a derisive grin. "You made one mistake, Devon," he said. "There's one thing I'd rather have than gold—a pretty woman. I carried out my bargain till I got a look at Lana. Then I quit you cold. I've got her old man's gold, and I've got Lana. That herd out there is yours. Better take it, Devon, and ride out of Helltown with your men. It's what you wanted, ain't it?"

Devon's slim shoulders tensed under his

wool shirt. His right hand rested lightly on the tooled cartridge belt close to his pearl handled .45. He slowly inched his booted feet apart.

"I want the girl, too. I'm holding you to your bargain, Bauman."

Bauman laughed in the smaller man's face, and Devon knew the answer. Out-numbered and out-gunned, the pride that had driven Denver Devon up to a position where he controlled the destinies of many men would not let him take a doublecross like this. For this story would travel far and wide, and the shady gentry that rode the back trails would get many a belly laugh when it was told. And ridicule, Devon could not afford.

A curse spewed out of his clenched jaws, and the spat of his palm sounded loud in the silent room as his hand snapped around his gunbutt. Behind him, his men broke into desperate action also.

Devon's gun never cleared leather. Bauman's mad laughter boomed out, and that devilish mask, that Tom Lincoln remembered so well, twisted his ugly face again. With the swiftness of a striking copperhead, his left hand chopped down on Devon's gun hand, and the giant's other hand flicked his gun into flaming action with a magical smoothness that was unbelievable.

Three times, Bauman triggered his weapon. Three round holes appeared in Devon's fancy shirt over his heart, slamming him backward, lifeless to the dirt floor, a look of surprise on his dead face.

Before the shattering thunder of the shots had died away, Tom dove through the scattering forms of the outlaw gang. Their guns were in their hands, and the explosions rocked the room, but Tom was thinking only of Lana and praying that one of these ricocheting bullets did not strike her.

She was sprawled on her stomach on the

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hard packed ground, and for one sickening moment he thought she was wounded. He spoke her name. She looked around at him, and by the wan smile on her face he knew she was all right.

"Follow me!" he yelled, and with his words he slid his guns out of leather and thumbed them at the four lanterns that hung from the pole rafters overhead. The lanterns shattered and their smoky light snuffed out as if they had been doused by one giant hand.

Moving fast, Tom ran for the door, feeling Lana's hand fast on his cartridge belt. They ran through silence, a silence that had gripped the saloon with the coming of darkness, for there was no distinguishing friend from foe. Inside was the smell of fresh blood and black powder and the moans of wounded and dying men; in the cool, clean night outside was temporary safety from the mad butcher who had killed to gain possession of Lana, who would keep on killing until he had her locked in his cabin again.

They slipped through the door, and freedom was almost theirs. They moved cautiously now, and more confidently. They rounded the corner of the saloon wall. It was then that the ghostly shadow detached itself from the deeper gloom beside the building and swung in close to Tom. Lana jumped, and a scared cry broke upon her lips.

Tom felt the sharp prick of a knife blade against his ribs. "You better stick around," a voice said. Cherokee Poe's voice, and in it a hidden longing that Tom would make a break. "Make one funny move, Texas, and I'll make you eat this blade clear up to the haft."

He had done his best, Tom knew. A man couldn't do more. As Cherokee Poe herded them back to the saloon entrance, he wondered if there'd be another chance. But in his heart, Tom knew better.

He'd played his string to the limit. His luck was running out.

Chapter VI

TRAIL'S END

LAMPS and lanterns were brought from the cabins, and in their flickering, kerosene light the bloody shambles that claimed the saloon interior was a sickening sight. Denver Devon lay in a pool of his own blood, and three of his men were dead beside him. The three survivors of his little band had tossed away their weapons, all the fight was gone out of them. Several of Bauman's men nursed bullet wounds, but the big fellow didn't have a scratch on him.

Tom saw that Bud Skene and Yarber were missing, and the knowledge gave him some comfort. If they decided to aid him, as Bud

had promised, there was still hope. He put Lana in a chair and stood before her, so she could not see the dead men there on the floor. Her face was very white. He thought she was going to be sick, until he saw the color come back to her cheeks.

Cherokee Poe took Tom's guns and laid them on the bar. The half-breed then whispered at some length in Bauman's ear, and Tom wondered at the bitter scowl that hardened on the man's face. He saw the swift flow of words that came out of Bauman's mouth, and Cherokee Poe nodded his head in approval before gliding out into the night.

Bauman walked up to them. "I ought to wipe you out right here," he said harshly, his eyes glowing like to red coals. "I'm wise to you, Tom Lincoln. I suspected you when you horned in on our party on the trail today. Soon's we round up Bud and Yarber, I'm hanging the three of you to the nearest tree."

His knee came up, and the unexpected blow caught Tom in the groin, with all of Bauman's heavy weight behind it. The pain and the shock were paralyzing, and Tom's numbed legs gave way under him. He collapsed to the dirt floor.

It was all blurred then as the pain rolled over him, but he heard Lana's horrified cry, and knew that she had flung herself down to comfort him. Bauman jerked her to her feet. He snapped an order and two men led the girl away. Then Bauman's pointed boots slammed against Tom's ribs. Savage, relentless kicks that added to the pain and brought merciful oblivion, for the room spun crazily before Tom's dimming vision. Everything went black.

Tom opened his eyes one hour later and stared unseeingly into the inky blackness about him. At first he didn't bother to wonder where he was. He was sprawled out on a smelly saddle blanket and he wasn't tied. His ribs throbbed achingly, and the hurt brought back memory of Scarface Bauman's brutal kicks. Slowly he got to his feet.

He staggered and his outstretched hands touched a log wall. Leaning his weary back against it, he felt of his body and decided that no bones were broken, though the bruising after-effects of two mailings at Bauman's hands were painfully evident.

Strength was seeping back into his muscles. He circled the room and knew it was that and nothing more. Except for a heap of empty whiskey bottles in one corner and some old saddle gear in another, the room was vacant. Yellow light leaked under a crack in the one door, and Tom found it locked. On the other side of the barrier he heard glasses clink and the lowered voices of men, and by those signs he knew he was imprisoned in a rear room of Helltown's saloon.

By the darkness about him he knew that it was still night; by the tenseness of the voices out there in the barroom he knew that the search for Bud Skene and Long Tom Yarber was still going on. And, since he had satisfied himself that escape from this room was a thing of the future—if ever, he sat down on the dirt floor, leaned his back against the wall, and tried to whip up an idea that might outsmart Bauman and his men.

Ideas did not come. Memories did. Once again he was back in those days of the Civil War, when Big Tom Lincoln and so many of his neighbors had left their Texas ranches and donned the colors of the Confederacy. He'd been a kid then, riding the range with Lana Vance, feeling a strange attachment for the laughing, carefree girl.

The war's aftermath changed things. Big Tom Lincoln rode home to a starving, bankrupt country. So did the neighbors that came back. They didn't whine. They pitched in and began rebuilding their ranches and their cattle herds. They worked early and late and they brought success out of chaos—until Denver Devon appeared in the coast rangeland.

They needed money and they were depending upon their trail drives to Kansas to supply it. Denver Devon loaned them the needed money months before they started their herds up the trail to market. They put up their ranches as security, and many a man lost everything when disaster overtook his herd somewhere along the trail. They suspected Denver Devon. Nobody could produce evidence of his guilt.

With their backs to the wall, they'd pooled their last cows and sent them toward Dodge, and Big Tom Lincoln had charge of the drive. Cannily, he'd sent one herd ahead under old Elijah Vance, and followed on its heels with the other herd.

But, as young Tom Lincoln now knew, Denver Devon had not been fooled—that is, until he made the fatal mistake of trying to match guns with the outlaw who drew Devon's pay. And Denver Devon's death had not stopped the coast country's need for the gold upon which they were depending.

It was up to Tom Lincoln to deliver it to them. He smiled bitterly. If those folks could see him now.

And there was Lana. If he managed to seize the money and escape from this camp, she must go with him. For Tom Lincoln there was no other way. The girl meant everything to him, and his acceptance of the fact only increased the determination to escape that brewed within him.

HE stiffened at the sound of soft footsteps on the other side of the wall. There came a grunting and swearing and the rasping noise of rusty, protesting hinges, and a little

square of luminous light popped into the blankness of the cabin wall as the shutter that covered the window was removed.

"Psst. Texas?"

Bud Skene's cautious whisper. Tom limped to the window. The opening was shoulder high and too small to crawl through. It represented escape and freedom, but Tom knew he couldn't use it. A faint gray colored the sky that rimmed the low bulk of the black hills in the distance. Dawn would soon be here.

"Yarber and I been huntin' cover all night," Bud whispered. "Bauman's got his men coverin' this valley everywhere. We fooled him by stickin' in camp. Come daylight, he'll gather us in. There's only three hombres watchin' you. We're ready to take this place apart and get you out of here, Texas."

"Give me a gun," Tom Lincoln said. "I'll bust out of here myself. When you hear a ruckus, come on in the front door."

He took Bud's gun. The heft of the weapon in the palm of his hand was reassuring. He still wore his cartridge studded belts, but he did not slide the gun into a holster. Holding the gun in his right hand, he moved to one side of the door and waited until he was certain that Bud Skene and Yarber were ready for his escape.

Tom Lincoln began groaning. The deep, rasping sobs of a man in mortal agony. He kicked the log wall, and it was the sound of a dying man's last convulsive movements. He let the sound and the sobs fade away, and the sudden silence that descended over the room on the other side of the wall brought a grim smile to his unshaven face.

The sound of Death shocked even those outlaw killers, and it brought the investigation for which Tom had hoped.

Spur chains jingled as someone strode to the door and fumbled with the bar that locked it. The door swung inward on squeaky hinges, letting an oblong of light pour into the little room. The indistinct form of a man swam before Tom Lincoln's blinded eyes, and Tom's up-raised arm descended with automatic speed. His borrowed gun cracked against the careless outlaw's head, and the man moaned faintly as he sagged to the floor.

Leaping over the sprawled body of the unconscious man, Tom darted into the barroom, his gun covering the two men sitting at a poker table. Shocked surprise was in their ugly faces. And fear. For the naked, blazing light in the pale eyes of the tow-head facing them was one they knew well.

"On your feet," Tom ordered hollowly. "Pronto!"

Maybe it was the blood and the dirt that grimed his flannel shirt and saddle-warped overalls. Maybe it was their recollection of the steel and the purpose that must be prodding

him on after the two beatings he had taken at Bauman's hands. They sat glued in their chairs.

Tom Lincoln's white teeth bared in a wild grin. He eared back the hammer of Bud Skenes' gun, then squeezed the trigger. Two times he did that and the shots sounded almost as one. Each man at the table clapped a hand to a bleeding ear, and the fear on their white faces was building by the second.

"On your feet," Tom Lincoln said again, and this time there was no hesitation. He took their guns and was herding them into the little storeroom when Bud Skene and the grizzled Yarber plunged through the front door, tensed like fighting tomcats, their guns in their hands. They quickly sized up the situation, but the tenseness did not leave them.

"Yore shootin' played hell," Yarber said. "They heard it all over the valley, and they'll be closin' in on us."

Bud Skene's old-wise eyes gleamed with excitement.

Tom turned to the bar, swept up his two Peacemakers, ejected the empty shells in the cylinders and punched in fresh loads. He did not look around when he heard the loud pleading of the outlaws. Bud Skene laughed tonelessly. There came the meaty sound of metal against flesh, the thud of limp bodies collapsing to the floor.

Tom asked, "Is Lana in Bauman's cabin?"

"Yeah," Bud Skene murmured. "Bauman's there watchin', and he's got a trap staked about the place. He figgered you were safe, Texas, but he hoped to catch me and Yarber."

Long Tom Yarber held up a gnarled hand for silence. "Listen. I hear hawsses. Lots of 'em. We better lock this here place up right quick."

Tom Lincoln shook his head. "No. When that bunch rides in, it still won't be light enough for them to recognize us. We'll mix with them outside and work into Bauman's place. I'll take him on. You two get Lana out of there during the excitement. If I'm lucky, I'll join you later . . ."

TOM wasn't so sure of himself. He put the thought out of his mind, as he slid out the door into the murky half-light of dawn, closely followed by his companions.

Riders thundered into camp from all directions. The urgency and speed with which they quit their mounts and took to cover in the cabins was not lost on Tom. There was a lot of excited talking, and a lot of scurrying in and out of Bauman's place. Then an expectant, deadly silence descended over Helltown.

More sounds came to Tom Lincoln's ears, beating against the quick stillness like the stirring roll of army drums summoning troops to a charge. The sound of fast-riding men,

making no effort to hide their coming. And by the mighty thunder of their pounding hoofbeats, the trio knew that many men rode toward them.

They came into sight, those riders, ringing the camp with swift, certain precision. They carried saddle carbines across their laps, and little groups of them scattered, each group about a cabin, and when their deadly pattern was complete, Tom Lincoln saw that this fight must have been planned well in advance.

He quit the shelter of the saloon wall, as gunfire ran over Helltown's little street, and Bud Skene and Yarber spread out behind him. These unknown riders were dismounting now, so a man on foot, and ducking among the cabins, might pass as one of them.

Tom made for Bauman's cabin, running as fast as he could in his high heeled cowboy boots. He carried a gun in each hand and he rocked forward with a driving determination that would not be stopped—unless by the bullets that snapped and snarled through the cool morning air about him.

He flung himself under the barred window at the rear wall of the cabin, winded, gasping for breath. When he was able, he called out, "Lana?" Again, and louder. "Lane, it's Tom. Can you hear me?"

The cautious reply assured him that his thinking had been correct, that Bauman had locked Lana in her room while the fighting was going on.

Rapidly he instructed her. "Get Bauman's attention any way you can. Pretend you've been wounded by a stray bullet. I'm coming in the front."

The circle of strange besiegers was drawing tighter about the building. Any moment one of them might realize Tom Lincoln was not one of them and send a bullet into his body. But he had to stay in his half crouch under the cabin window until Lana had tricked Bauman into her room.

He heard her scream, then begin to moan. Those moments that he waited for the sound of Bauman's voice were an eternity. The guttural voice finally came. Tom uncoiled his long legs and darted around to the front of the house.

The heavy door would be barred. Tom threw his weight against it, realizing that here was the one flaw in his plan and that he had thought of it too late. Bauman would have plenty of time to discover that Lana was uninjured and to prepare for him before he broke into the room.

His indecision caused him to hit the door with slackened speed. It swung inward. Tom tumbled inside, confused by the bit of luck and unprepared for it.

Over and over, he rolled, managing to keep his guns in his hands. He came upright in a

sitting position, one of his legs twisted under him, and he looked about to see Bauman's huge bulk before him. That demonical scowl was spread across the renegade's ugly face, and the guns in the giant's hands were bucking and spitting flame.

Tom eared back the hammers of his Peacemakers and began triggering as Bauman's lead entered his body. He jerked around as a bullet tore through his left side. Another bullet slammed into the leg under him. Others came so close that he felt their hot breath licking at his skin. But no more of Bauman's lead found its mark.

There was good reason. Every one of Tom's bullets had pierced Scarface Bauman's chest. That devil's mask of a face leered at Tom through the swirling clouds of smoke; then the evilness and the hatred faded away as life ebbed from that giant body. Bauman crashed to the punchon floor, his heavy weight shaking the cabin.

TOM was still on the floor, but his head was cuddled in Lana's arms, and he looked mighty happy when Captain Barr of the Texas Rangers entered the cabin some few minutes later, after the last of Helltown's fighting inhabitants had been killed or had surrendered. "I thought it was you out there," Tom said. "How'd you ever find this place, Captain Barr?"

Barr grinned and took his time about answering. "We knew about it a long time but we didn't know just where it was. One of your TL trail hands met us on the trail last night and led us here. He followed you after the

ruckus yesterday. We came as fast as we could."

Tom looked doubtful. "This ain't Texas. How come you way up here where you got no jurisdiction?"

Again Captain Barr grinned. "We quit the Rangers, Tom. There's no law against it. We're pinning our badges on the moment we hit the Red."

He examined Tom's wounds, and the anxiety faded out of his weathered face. "You can ride a horse," he said. "Last time I told you that, I offered you a Ranger job. Remember?"

"Yeah. I had a job to do. I did it."

"I'm offering you the same job again, son."

Tom stirred in Lana's arms. He looked steadily into her face before he made his reply.

"Down on the coast back home they're waiting for Big Tom Lincoln to bring them the gold he promised. Big Tom won't ride back, Captain, but they'll get their money."

"They need men down there. I'll be marrying and settling down on the TL spread. I've got two punchers who'll be moving down there to work for me."

He looked happily at Bud Skene and Long Tom Yarber. And he could tell by looking into Captain Barr's face that the two men would not be held.

Tom felt warm and alive for the first time in weeks. He pulled Lana's head down and kissed her firmly. He didn't look at Captain Barr this time when he spoke.

"I'm turning down that Ranger job again, Captain."

THE END

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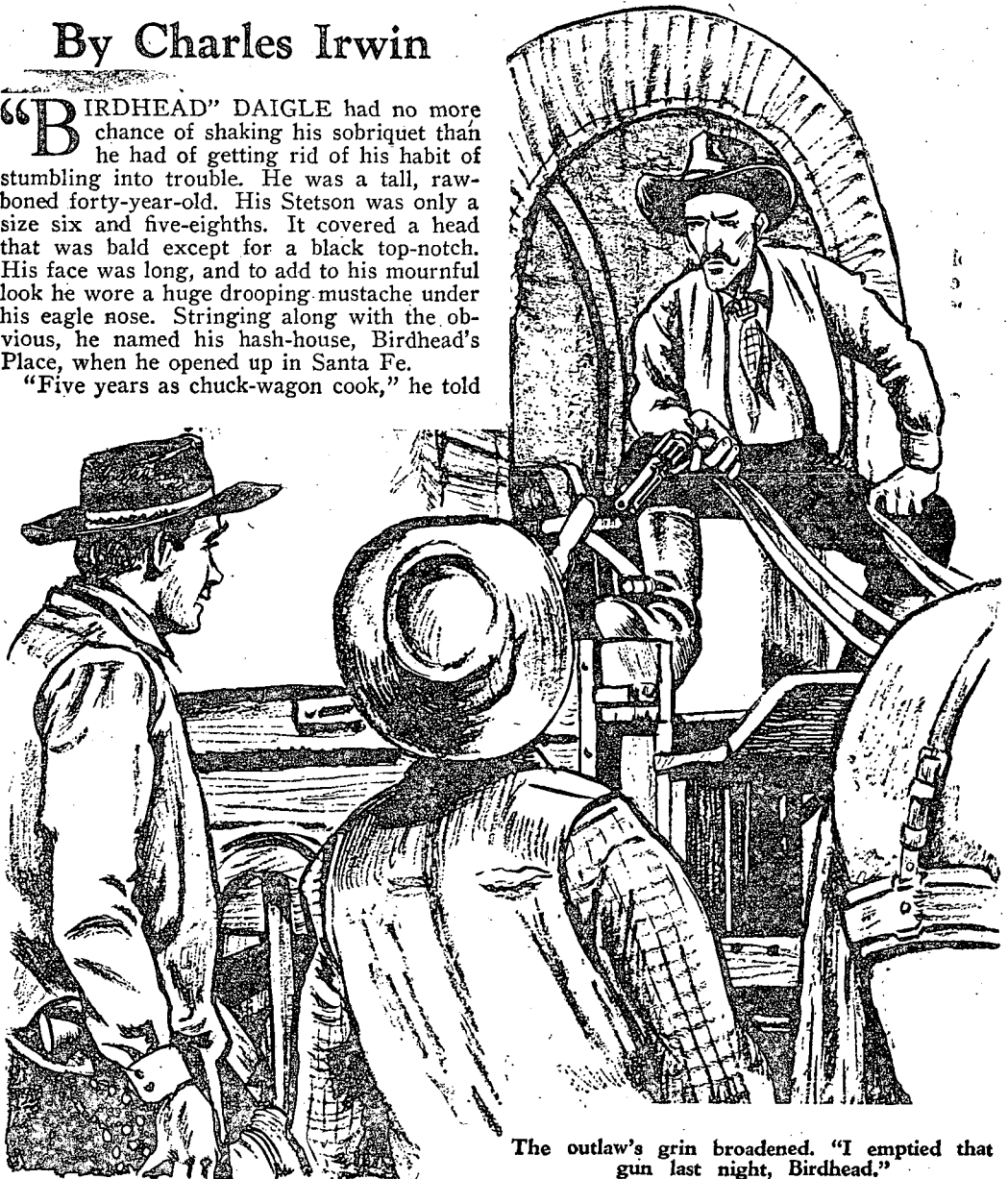
THE TROUBLES OF BIRDHEAD DAIGLE

As if butchering the boss's prize bull wasn't enough, Birdhead Daigle was ordered to apply the same method to that war-necked cowman himself!

By Charles Irwin

"BIRDHEAD" DAIGLE had no more chance of shaking his sobriquet than he had of getting rid of his habit of stumbling into trouble. He was a tall, raw-boned forty-year-old. His Stetson was only a size six and five-eighths. It covered a head that was bald except for a black top-notch. His face was long, and to add to his mournful look he wore a huge drooping mustache under his eagle nose. Stringing along with the obvious, he named his hash-house, Birdhead's Place, when he opened up in Santa Fe.

"Five years as chuck-wagon cook," he told



The outlaw's grin broadened. "I emptied that gun last night, Birdhead."

the man he rented from. "I've had a bellyful of it. I'm goin' to settle me down in this here boom town, an' never git hooked to a trailher no more!"

Things were going along fine until one day a couple of dust-covered characters strode into his grill. They were both gunhung, which wasn't strange, since most Westerners packed two guns somewhere or other on their person. These jaspers ordered a pair of steaks. While Birdhead started frying them they talked casually with him.

One of the men was a six footer with about two hundred pounds of bone and muscle. "Sam Fleck's my name," he told Birdhead. "This here's Ed Rowe."

Rowe was a good looking young fellow, tall and lean like Birdhead Daigle, but with a mean glint in his eyes. Birdhead wasn't exactly glad to meet either of these boys, but he knew better than to show it.

"How'd you like to let us open up a gamblin' room in back?" Fleck said, as Birdhead set his steak before him. "We'll give you ten percent of the take, an' no cost to you."

Birdhead Daigle shook his head. "This ain't no spot for gamblin'," he said. "Seems to me a saloon'd be a better place." He turned to slap Rowe's steak on a plate.

"All the saloons in town have got gamblin'," Fleck told him. "Far as Ed an' me are concerned, this place'll be all right."

"Sorry, boys," Birdhead said. "You'll have to find another spot. This here's a restaurant."

He set Rowe's steak on the counter, then froze.

"I says," Fleck drawled, "how'd you like to let us open up a gamblin' room in back?"

"You boys is very convincin'," Birdhead said. "I think it would be just fine. Ten percent it is."

There was just one reason why he agreed so readily. He was staring into the bores of two Colt's .45s. One protruded from Fleck's hand; the other from Rowe's. Both men were smiling at him very testily.

"You're a man of good judgement," Rowe complimented.

Birdhead Daigle was not a hard-drinking man. But he got good and drunk that night. He always did that when he figured himself in trouble. It was a good way to forget. He closed his grill at about nine, and left a crowd of men playing poker in the back room.

NEXT morning he awakened to find himself jogging toward the Llano Estacado on a mule. Somberly riding at his left on a big palamino was Sam Fleck. Ed Rowe straddled a black at Birdhead's right. Birdhead's first query was, "What happened?"

"We got run out of town," Fleck explained briefly.

"You boys," Birdhead suggested, "wasn't caught dealin' cold poker by any chance."

Rowe shrugged. "You wouldn't accuse us of bein' dishonest, would you now, Birdhead?"

Daigle looked from one to the other. He decided he wouldn't.

"But how come I'm out here?" he asked.

"On two counts," Fleck told him. "First, you was proprietor of the joint, wasn't you? Second, you tried to escort the minister's daughter home from a Ladies' Aid tea-party last night. Birdhead, you ought to be ashamed!"

Birdhead groaned. Why, he asked himself, did he have to do such outlandish things while under the influence of John Barleycorn? Right then and there he made a solemn vow. Never again!

"But never you mind," Fleck said encouragingly. "You just stick with Ed an' me, an' you'll be all right as we've decided to sort of adopt you."

Birdhead didn't figure there was much else to do. All he had in the world was tied up in Santa Fe. He considered it very impractical to try going back there.

"Where we headed?" he inquired.

"Texas," Fleck announced. "There's a ranchero named Cris McAbee who needs hands. We heard some boys talkin' about it last night. McAbee's startin' a big cattle drive to Dodge City. We three are signin' on with him."

"Oh, no I ain't," Birdhead protested. "I ain't cookin' for no more trailhands."

"Ain't you?" Fleck yawned.

Birdhead looked at him. How did that hombre get that gun out so fast?

Cris McAbee's Busy Bee spread was a fine layout. McAbee himself greeted them as they rode to the ranch house. He was a small, compact man about twenty-five. His talk was brisk. Birdhead liked him first off.

"The pay is forty and beans," McAbee said. "You boys are hired as of now." He looked up at Birdhead. "You don't look much like a cowpoke, mister."

"He ain't," Fleck said. "He's a cook."

"That's fine, McAbee said. "Just what I been lookin' for. You boys'll find the bunkhouse around the other side of the shed. Pile in an' make yourselves to home."

Birdhead, Fleck, and Rowe headed toward the bunkhouse. On the way, Birdhead remarked, "It seems mighty strange that you two should be *workin'* for a livin'."

"We'll be workin'," Rowe told him. "But for somethin' better than a livin'."

Birdhead looked at him narrow-eyed. "Just what you got in mind?" he wondered.

Fleck answered, "I said you'd do all right stickin' with us, didn't I? We three are goin' to sell McAbee's herd when we get to Dodge.

Then we'll split this here dinero between us."

"Yeah?" Birdhead said. "An' just what is McAbee an' his trailhands goin' to be doin' about that time?"

"They," Fleck grinned, "will either be flyin' around up there wearin' wings or pitchin' horseshoes in hell."

"Owlhoot!" Birdhead snapped. "I'll have no part of it!"

"Pipe down, you fool!" Rowe said between his teeth. "You wouldn't like to change your mind?"

His gun jabbed Birdhead between a couple of ribs. Birdhead had seen fast gunthrowers in his day, but never any like these two.

He said, "Like I says before, you boys is very convincin'."

"An' you better stay convinced," Fleck advised. "You see, Birdhead, we happen to know that your rep in the cow country ain't no better'n ours. The only reason you ain't been kicked out of more towns is that there *ain't* no more towns!"

With this, Birdhead was forced to agree. Sober, he was all right. But during his occasional sprees there was no telling what kind of devilry he might get into.

"Now, look," Fleck continued. "We'll get enough from McAbee's herd to put us on Easy Street for a good long time. Do you want a third of it—or—?"

"I says I'm convinced," Birdhead growled.

"All right," Rowe said. He holstered the gun. "We're keepin' an eye on you, Birdhead. Don't get no ideas about tellin' McAbee."

Cris McAbee turned out to be as fine a boss as a man could ask for. Also, Birdhead Daigle developed a fatherly fondness for McAbee's pretty wife and their toddling two year old son. Birdhead had no idea of letting Fleck and Rowe get by with their plan. The only trouble was he didn't know just how he was going to stop them.

For the time, he decided to let the owlhooters think he was wholeheartedly with them. Maybe their vigilance would relax. But as time to hit the trail for Dodge drew near Birdhead became a very worried and troubled individual.

THE sun beating down on the canvas cover made the inside of the chuck-wagon feel like a Ditch oven. Birdhead came to at about ten o'clock. Sweat streamed from every pore. His mouth tasted of rancid whiskey. Birdhead got it through his befuddled mind that the wagon was bouncing over the trail. Last he remembered, he was whooping it up in an Amarillo saloon. From then on, life was a blank.

He peered bleary-eyed through the front opening to see Sam Fleck watching from the driver's seat. He stopped the wagon.

This had a very unfavorable effect on Birdhead's stomach. He wriggled from under a fifty pound sack of dried beans and made a dive for the tail-gate. Holding on with both hands, he hung his head over. Fleck's palamino was tied to the tail-gate. The horse watched Birdhead critically.

"You blasted idiot!" Fleck snarled. "What's the big idea of goin' on a drunk just before the big drive? I ought to put a slug through your belly!"

The way Birdhead felt, that would be all right with him. He climbed outside where it was a little cooler. An earthen jug hung on the wagon. The water was lukewarm, but it helped.

"Don't bawl me out, Sam," Birdhead groaned. "I ain't doin' so good."

"Serves you right," Fleck growled. He slid from the driver's seat. "You sure are a purty sight!"

Birdhead reached in the wagon, found his badly mangled hat. "Where are we?" he inquired.

"On the trail to Dodge," Fleck told him. "When Ed an' me found you missin' last night, we rode to Amarillo after you. We found you in an ail, passed out. Also, them bumps on your face would indicate you got into a fight."

Fleck studied him through narrowed eyes. "Also," he went on, "the General Store was burglarized last night. There's them that figger you done it, Birdhead. Ed an' me hustled you back to the Busy Bee while they was searchin' for you."

"Oh—oh!" Birdhead closed his eyes, hoping to erase such horrible thoughts from his mind. Then he searched his pockets for loot he was supposed to have robbed.

"We didn't find no money on you," Fleck said. "Some jigger must've got to you before we did."

He walked to the tail-gate, untied his palamino. "McAbee says for you to ford the Canadian. Make camp for tonight on the other side."

Fleck mounted. "The herd's three-four miles back." He swung his horse around, then reined in.

"Here's something you maybe didn't know, Birdhead," he drawled. "McAbee's an honorary deputy sheriff of Potter County. In case you figger to cross Ed an' me, McAbee'll get wind of that General Store burglary."

Grinning, Fleck cantered back toward the herd.

A very unhappy chuck-wagon cook, Birdhead Daigle crossed the shallows of the Canadian toward Dusk. He pulled in beneath a cottonwood, unhitched and hobbled the drawmules. The next hour was spent rustling enough wood for a cookfire.

HE'D gotten the blaze going when two horsemen arrived in camp almost before he knew it. Birdhead turned from the fire, looked up at them.

The riders wore ankle-high moccasins and cotton pants, over which their naked torsos glistened coppery in the evening sun. Each carried a lance, a short bow and quiver of arrows. They were Comanches. They weren't decked out for war, though—no paint or shields. Birdhead had seen these bucks around. He knew one as Chief Red Pinto. The other was called Loco.

They held out baskets slung from their shoulders. The chief spoke one word:

"Grub."

Both Comanches grinned.

Daigle cocked his head to one side. "Look," he said, "I got a crew of hungry trailhands to feed. I ain't feedin' you two."

"Seben," Red Pinto corrected. He spread the fingers of one hand, then pointed west. Birdhead got the idea that five other bucks waited out of sight.

If a ceiling had been handy, Birdhead would have hit it.

"Shoo!" he yelled, waving his hands. "You Injuns git back to yore reservation!"

But the Indians' grins broadened. In a mixture of English, Spanish, and Comanche, Birdhead was then informed that the two bucks had been in Amarillo last night. They had witnessed the robbery of the General Store. If Birdhead didn't give them grub they would tell Cris McAbee.

Birdhead immediately started broiling steaks and baking bread and potatoes for seven. When he filled the Indians' baskets,

Red Pinto was very upset over the fact that there were no beans. Beans, the chief claimed, were a favorite morsel of his.

"Dang yore hide!" Birdhead roared. "Beans has got to simmer overnight!"

"Sta wayno," Red Pinto nodded. "Manaña."

"Manaña—hell!" Birdhead retorted. "I reckon you boys figger to foller me clean to Dodge!" That was all he needed.

"Uh-huh," Red Pinto grinned.

Somberly, Birdhead watched the chief and his side-kick gallop west.

"Manaña," he muttered sourly.

Ed Rowe rode across the Canadian with Cris McAbee and five trailhands shortly after dark. Saddle-weary, all the men but one peeled their broncs and staked them out to graze.

Rowe walked to the chuck-wagon ahead of the others. He hunkered down beside a hind wheel. Apparently, he wasn't paying any attention to Birdhead Daigle. Birdhead knelt before the fire. Rowe's lips moved.

"Sam's back there ridin' with the first shift of night herd," he whispered. "We talked today, made plans. You figger in pretty strong, Birdhead. This is goin' to be real easy."

Birdhead didn't answer. He turned the stick that held the bread roll, jammed the butt end of it back in the ground. Then he started greasing the frying pan.

"When we start blastin'," Rowe went on, "the crew will be split. Sam planted a gun in the chuck-wagon for you. It's in the left hind corner under a sack of spuds and you better use it nice-like!"

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Cris McAbee and his boys were approaching. Rowe stood up. He walked to the river, started washing up. Then Birdhead heard McAbee's voice behind him.

"You seen ol' Mossy Solomon, Birdhead?"

The Busy Bee owner was notorious for having one great love in his life other than that for his family. It was for a cranky old long-horn bull. Mossy Solomon and Cris had grown up together.

"He's gone an' strayed," McAbee explained. "I thought maybe he followed you."

Birdhead turned while getting the beef-steaks ready. "I ain't seen him," he declared. "If I do, I'll shore dab a loop on him for yuh, though."

"Cris," one of the punchers asked, "how come you brung ol' Mossy? You don't figger to sell your pet bull, do you?"

McAbee headed for the river. "I don't want to talk about it," he said.

WHEN supper was ready, the puncher who hadn't unsaddled was served first. Birdhead gave him grub to take back to the night riders. After he'd eaten, the puncher mounted, headed back.

Cris McAbee, with tin plate and cup, stood in line with the others. Birdhead served each man a steak, fried spuds, coffee, and a hunk of bread. Then Birdhead fixed a plate for himself. He had just consumed it when McAbee said:

"I still feel a mite hungry. Birdhead, could I get you to fix me another one of them steaks?" He glanced around at the men squatting on the ground. "How about the rest of you boys?"

Birdhead grunted, "Huh?"

"I said," McAbee repeated, "I'd like another one of them steaks."

"Oh, shore—shore," Birdhead said getting to his feet.

The hands decided they could use a bit more grub, too.

Birdhead would have been glad to broil another round but for one thing—he didn't have any more steaks. He'd used the surplus feeding those pesky Comanches. And he couldn't explain the circumstances to McAbee.

"I'll git some more water," Birdhead muttered. He grabbed a bucket, headed for the river.

He didn't need water to broil steaks. But he had an idea.

Returning to camp, he suddenly stumbled. The bucket flew from his hand. Birdhead watched the water splash out, completely extinguishing the fire.

"Wal, now," he grinned. "Ain't that clumsy o' me?"

"It sure was," McAbee agreed.

"I'll build another fire," Birdhead told him.

"Wood's kinda scarce, but it won't take more'n an hour or so."

"We'll be in our bed-rolls by then," McAbee said. "Forget it."

Somewhat disgruntled, the men went to the river, where they rinsed their tinware. Birdhead watched in the moonlight. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Nevertheless, once the men began seranading the prairie with a chorus of snores, Birdhead rustled some more wood. He built another fire, then brought an iron rack from the chuck-wagon. He placed it over the blaze. On the rack he hung a kettle of beans.

"I ain't gittin' that Red Pinto mad at me," he growled to himself. Then he bedded down.

One of his best snores was interrupted by a violent shake of his shoulders. Birdhead's eyes opened to the heavily jowled face of Sam Fleck.

"C'mon," Fleck grunted. He jerked a thumb over one shoulder. "I want to talk to you."

Birdhead wondered what was up. He climbed from his bed-roll, followed Fleck out of earshot in case any of the men should waken.

The gunmen spoke softly. "I got it all figured, Birdhead. We're lettin' these rannies drive the herd almost to Dodge. There's nine men to be reckoned with. I just rode in with three from early night shift. Ed rode out for late shift with three others. The same thing'll happen the night the fireworks go off. That'll leave three in camp for you, Birdhead. They'll be asleep. Ed told you where I put that gun, didn't he?"

Birdhead didn't answer.

Fleck snapped, "You listenin' to me?"

"Oh, shore—shore," Birdhead said quickly. "Reckon I was still half asleep."

"Sure you got it clear?" Fleck asked.

"It's clear, Sam," Birdhead assured him. "Very clear. About twenty-five miles this side of Dodge, we let 'em have it."

"Right," Fleck turned. "We better get back, now."

Birdhead said, "Just one thing, Sam. After we find a cattle buyer, what's to keep you an' Ed from burnin' me down an' takin' my share?"

Fleck wheeled on him, mouth tight. Narrow-eyed, he started for his gun. The gun half out of its holster, Fleck slowly relaxed. Grinning broadly, he let the weapon slide back.

"Aw, now, Birdhead," he drawled soothingly. "You don't think—" Fleck shook his head sadly. "Why, Birdhead, you make me feel bad thinkin' such things."

Birdhead wasn't sure, but he thought he saw tears in Fleck's eyes.

"Reckon I'm just a low-down, no-good un-

trustin' soul," he said. "I'm real sorry, Sam."

But Birdhead Daigle knew then that no matter which way he turned, he was one doomed chuck-wagon cook.

LATE next afternoon he made camp along the North Canadian. All day, the meat problem had been worrying him. He decided there was only one thing to do. He'd get that gun from the chuck-wagon. Then he'd ride one of the drawmules back and try to kill one of McAbee's steers without getting caught.

He could have reported the shortage to McAbee, whereupon the hands would bring in more meat. But McAbee was too shrewd not to know the supply couldn't be exhausted without outside help.

After unhitching the mules, Birdhead reached under the potato sack, fished out the gun. It was a .45. He broke it, then stared.

Every chamber in the revolver was empty!

"Now, what—" he began.

Just then Chief Red Pinto and Loco rode into camp.

"Consarn it!" Birdhead snarled up at them. "I got plenty trouble without you! Git to yore reservation, an' leave me be!"

Grinning, Red Pinto shook his head. "Braves say you cook better than squaw. They say not so much salt this time."

"So they're gittin' finicky!" Birdhead growled. "Yuh kin tell 'em they ain't gittin' so much salt today. Fact is, they ain't gittin' no salt. Further fact is, they ain't gittin' no grub!" Abruptly, he turned his back on the Comanches.

Then an idea dawned on him. He faced the Indians again. They hadn't budged, still sat their ponies, and grinned down at Birdhead.

"I'll feed yuh," Birdhead told them. "First, yuh gotta do me a favor. I'm out o' meat, see. Now, you boys take yore bows an' arrers, an' ride back an' kill me a stragglin' steer or somethin'."

Red Pinto understood. He looked at Loco.

Loco nodded. They jerked their ponies around, broke into a gallop.

"Don't let McAbee or his boys catch yuh!" Birdhead bawled after them.

He had his fire going when the Comanches returned. They were dragging a brush carrier behind them. On the carrier lay a brindle animal, an arrow through its heart. This critter's horns weren't long enough to make it a steer. It was either a cow or a—

Birdhead stared down at the carcass. There was a ring in the dead animal's nose. Birdhead groaned.

"Too old?" Red Pinto inquired. "Too tough?"

"This here," Birdhead said weakly, "is Mossy Solomon. Cris McAbee's pet bull!"

All this meant nothing to the Comanches. They shrugged. Red Pinto inquired, "You got beans today?"

Birdhead closed his eyes tightly. That did it. He just couldn't win. From now on, he was just going to drift along with whatever happened. Let come what will.

He prepared grub for the seven Comanches, and got Red Pinto and Loco on their way. After butchering Mossy Solomon, he knew he'd have to dispose of the remains. A few weighted down gunny-sacks and a reasonably deep pool of the North Canadian took care of that.

Birdhead's interest in life did not stay in a slump for long. He found himself wondering about that empty gun, which he had replaced in the chuck-wagon. Had it been empty when Fleck first put it there?

After the men were served that night they squatted, got to eating.

Birdhead almost jumped out of his skin when Cris McAbee said, "I sure would like to know what happened to Mossy Solomon."

At the same time, McAbee knifed in a solid hunk of the animal in question.

Ed Rowe took a bite of his steak. "This is plenty tough meat," he growled.



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McAbee chewed hard and thoughtfully. "Good flavor, though," he said.

Birdhead thought it a good idea to get onto another subject.

"Speakin' o' meat, Cris," he said, "couple o' the boys better bring me in a steer tomorrer. I'm gittin' low."

He never stopped thinking about that empty gun. Being split at midnight as the men would be, Birdhead realized that the part he was expected to play in this murder drama was an important one. But how could he do anything with a gun without bullets?

If five of the trailhands had looked carefully at their gunbelts, each would have found one cartridge missing. Birdhead deftly swiped two of them while serving the men. He procured the other three while they slept.

AFTER the hands were gone next morning, Birdhead loaded the gun, then put it back in the chuck-wagon. He knew enough to let the hammer rest on the empty chamber, thereby avoiding an accidental explosion from bouncing around. He then hitched the mules, pushed on toward Dodge.

He had just made camp that afternoon when two horsemen rode in. At first, Birdhead thought it was Red Pinto and Loco. It wasn't. It was Sam Fleck and Ed Rowe.

"Welcome," Birdhead greeted. "What you boys doin' in camp, now?"

"The excuse was," Rowe began, "to bring you in that steer."

"I don't see no steer," said Birdhead.

Fleck climbed off his palamino. "There ain't none," he grinned. "An' in a minute there ain't goin' to be no *you*."

Birdhead edged toward the chuck-wagon. From beside the tail-gate he demanded, "What you boys figger to do?"

"You was right," Fleck said. "We *was* goin' to burn you down after you helpin' us wipe out the Busy Bee crew. We've changed our plans. After what you said night before last I got mighty suspicious of you."

Rowe grabbed his gun-butt. "Let's get this over with, Sam," he growled impatiently. "I always *was* suspicious of him."

But Fleck was more of the cat playing with a mouse he'd just cornered. "We'll take care of McAbee's boys without you, Birdhead."

Birdhead's hand disappeared into the wagon. He came out with the sixgun, leveled the gun on the two owlhooters. He wasn't surprised when Fleck and Rowe didn't claw for their guns.

Fleck's grin broadened. "I emptied that after talkin' to you the other night, Birdhead. After you're dead we'll load it, shoot a couple times, an' tell McAbee we killed you in self defense." He threw back his head.

Fleck's belly-laugh broke abruptly with the blast of a sixgun. First he looked at Birdhead. Grey ribbons of smoke drifted from the gun in Birdhead's hand. Fleck then stared at Ed Rowe. Rowe's gun was half out of its holster. His eyes and mouth were wide with a surprised expression. Blood trickled from his shirt-front. Rowe was dead on his feet. Suddenly he folded, and thudded to the ground.

Fleck's jowls quivered. His eyes told he was experiencing a coward's fright. Birdhead Daigle's face was not good to look at just then.

Fleck had his gun out when Birdhead blasted again. The owlhooter triggered five times, his bullets plowing the ground. Birdhead's third slug slammed Fleck flat on his back.

Birdhead didn't know how long he leaned there against the chuck-wagon. The gun dangled from a limp hand when they found him. He'd never killed a man before, didn't know how to take it. The sun was still up when he was surrounded by riders. Gun-thunder must have brought them in a hurry.

First, he saw Cris McAbee dismount, and kneel between the bodies of Fleck and Rowe. McAbee looked at Birdhead questioningly. Then the voice of Red Pinto:

"You kill your friends. Why?"

The chief was mounted. Loco was there, too. So were the other five Comanches.

"They ain't friends o' mine," Birdhead muttered. "They figgered to kill McAbee's men, an' sell the herd. They're bad uns."

"*Yo sabe*," Red Pinto nodded. "They robbed the store in Amarillo."

Birdhead stared at him. "Then, why the—?"

It took persuasion and interpretation to get the whole story out of Red Pinto and Loco. But finally, Birdhead learned what happened the night he got drunk in Amarillo.

Once this was explained, Birdhead related to McAbee the plan Fleck and Rowe had in mind. McAbee not only believed Birdhead, but thanked him vigorously.

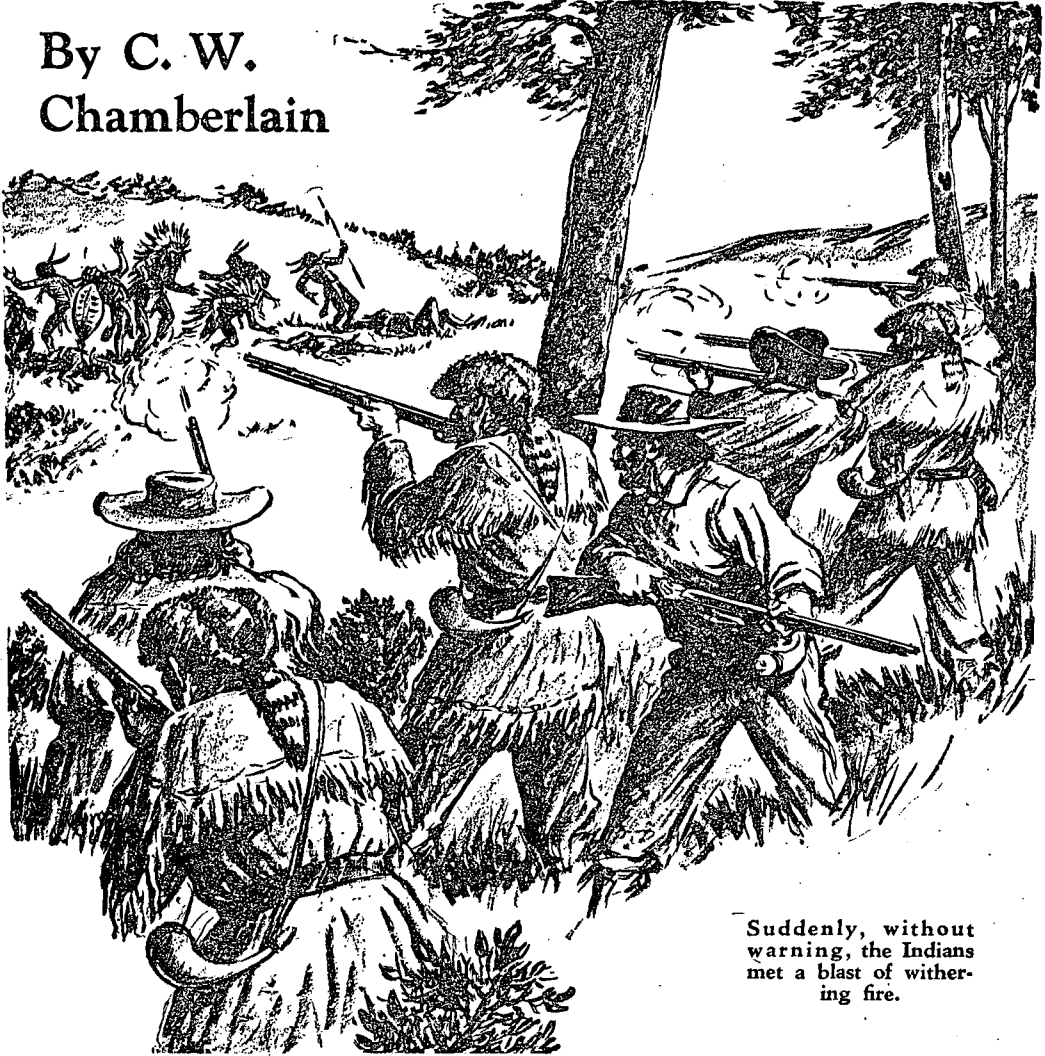
Now, Birdhead didn't have a worry in the world, except one—Mossy Solomon.

During supper that night, McAbee said, "I guess ol' Mossy's run away." He shook his head. "I hope so. I'd hate to think of him bein' butchered for beefsteaks. But my missus ordered me to get rid of him." He sighed. "Reckon she was right. He was always in the way when she was hangin' out the wash. An' she was always scared he was goin' to hurt our kid. I wonder where ol' Mossy is now . . ."

Sadly, Birdhead gave McAbee another helping of Mossy Solomon. He wanted the boss to be close to his pet bull until the end.

BUCKSKIN BREED

By C. W.
Chamberlain



Suddenly, without warning, the Indians met a blast of withering fire.

To his friends, the boot-tough mountain man was unswervingly loyal and rigidly honest. . . . But woe unto the hapless thief, tinhorn or gun-bully who intruded upon the privacy of this hermit-like pioneer.

THE Blackfoot peace-party, advancing that summer afternoon, were advancing in a friendly manner, carrying tokens of friendship. Suddenly, without warning, they met a blast of withering fire from the guns of the mountain men. With a deadshot behind each rifle, every Indian in the group was

slaughtered. Unable to understand this unprovoked massacre, the camp of a hundred bucks and squaws in the background, ran about trying to collect their children, after which they fled to the trees scattered along the creek.

Instead of advancing on the redskins, the forty mountain men stayed out of narrow

range and continued firing. With their superior arms and deadly marksmanship, the whites leisurely picked off the Indians among the scattered trees. It was a ghastly butchery. From time to time, other trappers, who had lingered at the Idaho rendezvous, joined the party of sharpshooters. By nightfall, only a few redskins were left to make their escape.

It was the annual "Grand Encampment" at the notorious Pierre's Hole, in 1832. Trappers, hunters and friendly Indians met at the rendezvous each summer to trade furs and refit themselves for the coming season. Drunken fights, brawls and killings were not uncommon at this annual jamboree—but this was something else. Fistic arguments between representatives of rival fur companies; battles between visiting redmen, and duels to the death were to be expected after too much alcoholic indulgence. But for these mountain men to ruthlessly annihilate a friendly Indian camp was carrying the celebration too far.

The massacre has gone down in history as a "battle" but it was nothing of the kind. It was a planned and premeditated case of sheer murder. A deep blot on that group of frontiersmen who contributed much to the winning of the West.

It is true that the Blackfeet were the one tribe that rarely were on amicable terms with the whites and that they waged a more or less constant warfare on the mountain dwellers. But there was no excuse for this unprovoked slaughter of a practically unarmed, peaceful party. It added no honor to the mountaineers' legendary high standards of heroic conduct.

Near the Wyoming border and now known as the Teton Basin, Pierre's Hole was the most infamous of several historic spots including Powder River, Brown's Hole, and the Green River Encampment. Thirty miles long by fifteen miles wide, Pierre's Hole was somewhat typical of these valleys where the trapper met his employer as well as old friends whom he hadn't seen for many months. It was here, with plentiful game and an abundance of grass for horses, that the Indians and their women were exploited and where explorers, hunters, scouts and other frontiersmen gathered to exchange the news and lay in their yearly supplies.

It was at Pierre's Hole that Bully Shunar met more than his match in a duel with Kit Carson.

Sitting on his horse, with loaded rifle, the "Bully of the Mountains" issued a challenge to any man present to meet him in single combat. He had taken in too much territory, for Carson quickly mounted his horse and with a loaded pistol, rode directly at the braggart. Both fired at the same instant and Carson's ball pierced the arm of the bully while Kit was

unharméd. Drawing his other pistol, the famous scout had Shunar begging for mercy with his arm dangling at his side. From then on, the mountain bully was no longer a menace to the other trappers.

The mountain men are a perennial type, descendants of Daniel Boone and John Coulter. They have varied little for much of their stamping ground has not been invaded by civilization. While the tax-collector and the census-taker may seek them out and the Indian has been dressed in pants, the habits of these diehards have changed only slightly with the years.

THERE is not always agreement among writers of western history on exactly what a mountain man is or was. A miner inevitably becomes one but a prospector may not be so classified. While some mountain men may have been prospectors at one time, the true type tends to seek solitude rather than gold. Trapping is more in his line and not always a great deal of that. Today, some of them are caretakers of isolated mines.

Some writers do not include trappers, hunters or explorers in the definition, while others leave out the hunters and explorers. It is not unusual to omit the itinerant prospectors. Unlike the desert rats, who spend their lives seeking the end of the rainbow, the mountain man is satisfied to live from day to day, free of irritating ambition and content with his rugged individualism.

However, this breed of hermit-like pioneer could hardly be confused with other types of frontiersmen. Jim Bridger was scout, hunter and plainsman; he was also a mountain man but with the sociability so often lacking in the latter.

Many of them were bachelors or, if they married, they never spoke of it. Some were more Indian in thought and habit than they were white, even to the point of lifting an enemy's scalp. It was not unusual for a mountain man to become devoted to his Indian wife's superstition and religion and to "make Medicine" at the sacred places.

Most of them spoke Indian—Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Shoshone and, in rare cases, the language of the Blackfeet. Being taciturn and silent, many preferred the sign language.

Because they lived as individuals, instead of in groups; kept no herds; hunted small game only, except for an occasional buffalo; and carried no threat of greater numbers of whites to follow, the Indian more or less accepted the mountain man.

His garments of buckskin and buffalo hide were so well greased and worn that the material was almost unrecognizable. Chameleon-like, he blended with the landscape, his pro-

tective clothing enabling him to fade, ghost-like, from view. In fact the Indian was no match for him with his wider knowledge, his doggedness, second wind, superior arms and marksmanship. The mountaineer, unlike the redman did not waste energy being dramatic and was conservative in all other things. There was little variation in his food or habits and he was thrifty to the point of being penurious.

Old photographs and etchings show him as gaunt and spare of frame, with wary, deep-set, lack-luster eyes. His nose resembled a beak and his mouth was just a slit in his weather-beaten, deeply wrinkled face.

He allowed himself just two luxuries when available, sweets and tobacco. The wild-honey tree sometimes supplied the first while he indulged himself with sugar at two dollars a pint at the annual meeting. He mixed willow bark or kinnikinnick with his precious store of tobacco except at the Grand Encampment once a year.

Whatever he undertook, he did thoroughly. He was not satisfied merely to understand the redman's language; he could read the "moccasin telegraph," an Indian grapevine system that caused other whitemen to marvel at his astute perception when danger threatened.

Among the hazards that he faced unflinchingly were the blizzards and extreme cold, unfriendly Indians, wild animals, snakes and the accidents common to mountain life. He used the redman's remedies along with those of the white when he was ailing.

Much of his time was spent dressing buckskin, tanning hides, making bullets, tending his traps, seeking for animal and Indian signs, ex-

ploring, and looking forward to the next rendezvous and his annual debauch. He sometimes had a mail system. A hunter passing through his section might leave a letter or a newspaper buried at the foot of a blazed tree.

If he accumulated too many "possibles," he was forced to cache his excess property. The cache usually was small at the top and rounded out below in the form of a jug. The excess dirt was carried away or dumped in a stream. Sod was replaced carefully over the opening or it was otherwise concealed. Among mountain men, these places were inviolate but wolves or Indians sometimes discovered them.

When he left for the rendezvous, his "possibles" were cached in one or more holes, hollow logs or caves. Sometimes he was a "free" trapper and "on the loose," while at other times he was under contract with a fur company.

As the Grand Encampment became a fixed institution, lasting sometimes for weeks, there was developed a headquarters along the same line to serve for the winter months. Here in comfort and congenial company the mountain man whiled away the cold weather, exchanging his dry wit and ribaldry, while his shack in the mountains lay buried under the snow.

Finally forts were built at some of these spots and one of them was Fort David Crockett, at Brown's Hole. Here the mountain man defied the icy blasts and renewed his friendships and his interest in the world outside the wilderness. Despite their many peculiar traits and habits, the mountain men will long be remembered for their contributions to the frontier West they helped to build.



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Doc flung the much dreaded blanket with all his might.

By
Archie Joscelyn

WITH GUTS, GUN, AND SCALPEL

"THERE'S death at Deadman's, Doc—they need a medico, bad—an' a law-man—"

The messenger had gasped out that much at Doc Henry's, forty-eight hours before—had gasped it out as he fell across the threshold, and then, having made a supreme effort to keep alive that long, had died, not speaking again.

Part of it had been exposure, of course—

Doc Henry was one of the few frontier medicos familiar with all the new-fangled methods. . . . But he knew that it needed more than all his skill to cure that wild bonanza camp of its strange and deadly malady.

cold, hunger, exhaustion. But a gaping rifle wound, almost between the messenger's shoulder-blades, had been the real cause, and had confirmed with added grimness the little that he had been able to say.

Right now, it must be twenty below, Doc judged, and the snow underfoot was deep, with more coming—a fog of flakes which filled the air and blanketed away the landscape like a fog. The snow was piled overhead along the usually barren ridges, gathered in vast drifts. The gold camp of Deadman's should be somewhere close, but whether it was or not, Doc no longer knew. He was lost, he realized now, lost like any tenderfoot.

There was no road, no trail, nothing but the white bleakness. And Deadman's lay deep pocketed in the hills. His horse had slipped on hidden ice that morning, breaking a leg. Doc had struggled ahead on foot. He'd been going almost without stopping for those forty-eight hours, alone. They needed a medico at Deadman's, and it was up to him to answer the call.

Needing a lawman was outside his province, something he could do nothing about in any case. There had been no sheriff nor deputy in town, nor any likelihood of reaching one for weeks, till the snows melted. Men would call him a fool, he realized, for trying to reach the isolated, snow-bound gold camp. It looked now as though they might have the right of it.

From somewhere, knifing through the soft silence of the falling snow, there came a cry of protest, a shrill, terror-choked shriek, sounding, in this spot, like the wail of a lost soul. Shivering with more than cold, Doc strained his eyes. He was a big, gaunt man with haunted, gentle eyes in a weary face which seemed years too old for his youthful frame.

Presently, guided by the sound of voices, he made out the blurred edge of a log cabin. This must be Deadman's at last. Like a white ghost in the storm, Doc advanced, to halt abruptly at sight of a man who stood in front of the door, watchfully holding a rifle. He had all the look of a sentry, or a guard.

The next moment, three men slipped out of the gloom, toward the guard. Their faces betrayed rage and fear, and each man clutched a stout club.

At sight of the rifle, however, they paused, and the guard saw them at the same moment. He raised the gun, started toward them.

"Ah, so ye would, would ye? Interfere, eh? Drop those clubs! Drop them, I say, before I shoot ye for dirty trouble-makers! Now march into that old shack there! Quick's the word!"

While Doc watched, unseen and incredulous, the three, helpless before the leveled gun, were herded into a second cabin close at hand. From inside the nearer one, which he had been guarding, and from whose chimney a bit of smoke ascended, came another howl of protest. Doc pushed open the door and stepped inside.

IT WAS an ordinary enough log shack, hastily built and crudely chinked. There was a table, a cupboard, bench, and a bunk against the far wall. A red-hot stove stood near the middle, a rusty stove pipe angling toward the roof.

There were four men in the single room, too busily occupied to notice him for a moment. One lay on the bunk, and a single glance was enough to tell Doc that he was sick, and the nature of his illness. He was close to death's door, with the dread scourge of the wilds—smallpox.

A second man, arms and chest bare, sat on the bench, closely watched by another burly red-haired giant who wore a six-shooter loosely in his coat pocket. A fourth man, who might have been handsome save that his face was pitted and scarred by the ancient pocks of the disease, stood with his sleeves rolled up, and the point of a knife-blade showing a dull ugly red, where it had all too plainly been dipped into one of the sick man's festering sores.

"We're doing this for yore own good, Tom McTigue," the burly man growled. "Make any more fuss, and I'll clip ye alongside the head with this gun-barrel. Now take it like a man!"

With a cat-like motion, the gunman had grabbed the victim's left wrist, holding it vise-like, while the man with the knife grasped his other. McTigue still tried to struggle, but there was little that he could do about it.

"It's murderin' me ye are," he panted, as the point of the knife-blade approached his arm. "Murder, I tell ye—"

The burly man swore suddenly as he caught sight of Doc, there beside the stove. Knife-point poised, the pock-faced man turned to look at him as well, and McTigue stared unbelievably, like a condemned man who receives a reprieve just as the trap is about to be sprung. Only the man on the bunk was too sick to take any interest.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded the man with the knife. "And how did you get here?"

"My name's Henry," Doc answered evenly. "Jack Henry. I walked here. Any objections?"

"How'd you get pass the sentry outside, and the lookout at the edge of town? Is everybody asleep?"

"Lookout?" Doc asked. "What lookout? I didn't see any."

"There's only one road in or out of here now," was the gruff retort. "Deadman's down here in the canyon, and the snow's blocked every other way out or in. And we're guardin' that, but you had the bad luck to blunder past in the storm, looks like. Now you're here, you'll just have to take your chances, along with the rest of us."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Doc demanded irritably. "What's going on here, anyhow?"

"Smallpox," was the grim answer. "Sam Kane here is bad off, as you can see. There ain't no doctor in camp, no chance to get any. So we're doin' the best we can, for ourselves and the rest of the world. We've posted guards, aimin' to keep everybody out till the plague's run its course. It's your bad luck that you got past him."

"Starvin' or freezin' outside isn't just my idea of good luck," Doc said drily.

"It might be better. You see what we've got here. And since we figger everybody has been exposed, we're going to take drastic measures. Vaccinate everybody in camp. Only thing we can do. That way, we'll get it over with, so that when spring comes, we won't be carryin' it outside, to start a plague all over the whole country."

The explanation sounded well enough, so far as the words went. But it was specious, Doc knew. There was an underlying grimness here of which the messenger who had reached town, with a bullet in his back, was just one symptom. Their intended victim, McTigue, spoke up quickly.

"He's lyin', stranger," he protested hoarsely. "I been tellin' him it's just plain murder, this way—and that's what you intend it for, Matt Peavey!"

Peavey, holding the knife, swung back, his cold eyes fixed on the speaker.

"You're a coward, is what ails you, Tom McTigue," he said. "Why should we want to murder you?"

Even as he spoke, Doc noted that the guard had almost ostentatiously taken the revolver in his hand and was toying with it.

"Why? Because you lobos want everybody in camp to die, so you can grab our claims when spring comes," McTigue answered defiantly. "It'll mean a fortune for you, if you can get rid of us. Ye've all six of you had smallpox before, so you ain't scared. But you know it'll be murder for the rest of us, with no medico around, givin' it to us that way. You don't aim to give us a chance, even."

Doc was beginning to understand. The monstrous nature of the thing was staggering. To "vaccinate" men in such fashion, from the virulent sores of a dying man, was almost certainly to insure that every one in camp would be, not immunized, but certain to contract the disease in its most virulent form.

Things were desperate, here. The messenger who had reached town had evidently managed to escape, knowing what impended. A handful of men who were immune had seized the guns, taken over power in camp. They had shot a man in the back, then waited a few days until they were convinced that he

had died without reaching help. Now they aimed to deal with their victims, one at a time, at gun-point.

Peavey shrugged now.

"That's a lot of rot, McTigue," he snapped. "And you ain't going to spread that story around camp. We're doing the best we can, things being the way they are. Now hold still—"

"McTigue's right," Doc said quietly. "What you're aiming to do would be murder, no less."

Peavey swung back, eyes slitted and dangerous.

"I don't like that word, Henry?" he growled. "Just what do you think you know about this, anyhow? And have you any suggestions for doing it better?"

"Happens I have," Doc flung back his heavy coat, brought out his black bag. "My name's Jack Henry—M. D. A man reached town a couple days ago—dying. Said you needed a medico here in Deadman's, bad. So I came."

Tense silence followed that pronouncement, while he saw the uneasy fear in the eyes of the two, the sudden hope in McTigue's.

"Maybe you're right, that everybody needs to be vaccinated," he went on. "But while your intentions may have been good, your methods were too crude. I'll vaccinate those who need it. I've got the stuff here to do it with."

Again the two eyed each other, undecided. Then Peavey managed a rather twisted smile.

"Why didn't you say you were a medico, in the first place?" he demanded with a false heartiness. He released McTigue's wrist, wiped the knife-blade on his pants, and pocketed it. His voice took on a note of complaint. "Do you think we liked to do this? But it was the only chance we saw. If you're a doctor, go ahead and take charge. And McTigue, maybe you and some of your friends won't go shootin' off yore mouths quite so reckless, about our intentions, next time."

DOC was kept busy, for the rest of the day, vaccinating everyone in camp. There were, he discovered, about a hundred in all, a few women and children as well as men.

His first suspicion was confirmed. Of the hundred, only Peavey and his five friends had any weapons. They had obtained possession, over a period of weeks, of every fire-arm in camp—at first by purchase and guile, and later by outright force or stealing. Then, with winter, as an ally, with guards posted to keep anyone from escaping or even ganging up against them, they had planned to carry out their murderous scheme, taking one or two at a time. Before spring came again, they would probably, in one way or another, have been the

only ones remaining alive, and so heirs to the riches of the claims owned by the others.

"They had a lot of the other folks fooled about it, and they aimed to get me and thim that might make trouble, first off," McTigue explained to Doc. "And I misdoubt but what they'd have worked it, too, if ye hadn't showed up whin ye did."

The three, who had been herded into the other cabin when Doc had first arrived, had been released. A gesture which had helped fool some of the camp, though it had failed to influence McTigue.

"It was you darin' to come here and then outfacin' Peavey that's given us a breathin' spell Doc," he said earnestly. "But that's all it is—just a breathin' spell till they can figure up some new way to get the same result. Peavey and his crew ain't through. Skunks don't change their stripes. If they had, they'd given us back our guns. Which they ain't doing, as annyone can notice. So watch yore step, Doc, man. They'll try again."

Doc believed him. There was nothing abstract in that theory. Killers remained killers. But Peavey's ready gesture in having Doc care for everyone had done a lot to convince most of the people that they had been mistaken in their first doubts of him. Several days passed, and he was very friendly and helpful, professing to be greatly relieved that Doc had come in the hour of the camp's greatest need.

During those days, Doc had been kept busy. He had treated the sick man, Sam Kane, and had managed to keep him alive, with an increasingly good chance that he would live. The danger from smallpox was about past.

One thing puzzled Doc. It was more then strange that one man should come down with so virulent an attack of the disease, and yet no one else catch it at the same time. Kane had been in the camp all winter, along with the rest of them.

Leaving McTigue's cabin, Doc stopped. It was colder now than on the day of his arrival

—at least forty below. Another foot of snow had fallen during the night. But the sky had cleared, the sun was shining, bleak and remote in a steely sky, with no heat in it. Then he saw Matt Peavy approaching, striving to plant an ingratiating smile on his face—though it was more like a smirk.

"You're doing good work, Doc," he said, rubbing his mittened hands together. "Mighty good work."

"We're lucky, no doubt of that," Doc agreed.

"You bet we are," said Peavey, and lowered his voice. "Mighty lucky, in that we've got plenty of supplies to last till spring. Bill Quantrell and I own the two stores, and they're well stocked. Know what's happened, now?"

"What?"

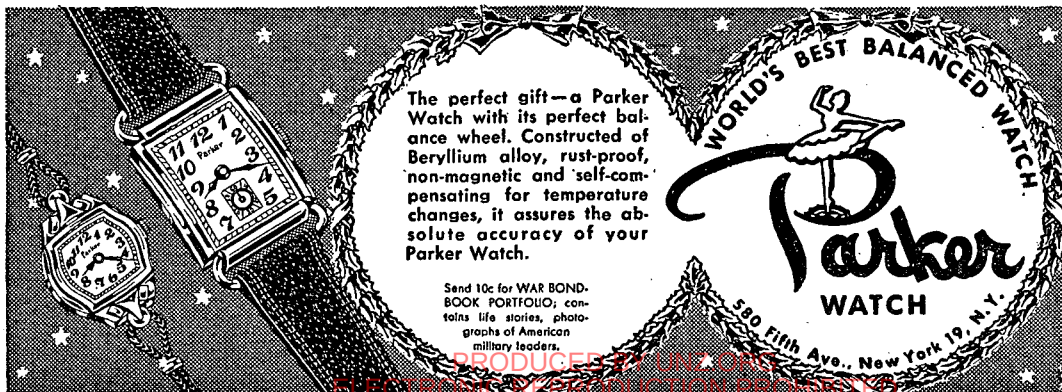
"This new snow and the wind has loosened that big overhang at the head of the canyon. Slid durin' the night. We did have a road out, of sorts—you got in by it. But now there'll be not gettin' out till the snow melts. So, like I say, we're lucky to have you to look after us, and plenty of supplies. I say it calls for a celebration—somethin' that'll take folks' mind off the fact that we're all cooped up here together for the next two months or so."

"How should we celebrate?"

"I'm goin' to throw a party. Big dinner for everybody in camp, this evenin'. Over at my store. Games afterward. What do you think of the idea?"

"It sounds all right," Doc conceded, and went on to Kane's cabin. It did sound all right—in fact, it was what he would have suggested himself to bolster lagging spirits. But the fact that it was Peavey who had suggested it, who was giving the feed, free, made him suspicious. McTigue's warning kept running through his mind.

SUCH a party would go a long way toward removing any lingering doubts of Peavey from everybody's minds. It would almost con-



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vince even the skeptics that he was the benefactor he was trying so hard to make them believe he was. After that, they would be ripe for some new trick. For Doc had discovered that the storekeeper was not noted for his generosity, and such a feed would cost a lot.

Kane was considerably improved. Doc told him of the impending dinner and party. The prospector scowled.

"Glad I can't go," he said. "I'd be scairt that anything he served would be full-up of p'ison."

"He wouldn't do that, of course," Doc said. "Not and get away with it. He's much too slick for that—no I don't think he will."

"Likely not," Kane conceded. "But he's got some trick up his sleeve. Know what the claims in this gulch are runnin', Doc? We hit real gold just when the freeze-up closed the workin's down and kept the news from spreadin'. But there'll be ten millions taken out of here next summer. I ain't yarnin'. I seen plenty strikes, and I know. Ten millions, easy. And Peavey and his crowd want that. It's plenty to kill a thousand men for, let alone a hundred."

Doc whistled. If Kane's estimate was anywhere near correct, it was a stake high enough to induce murder, no doubt of that. And to get possession, wholesale murder had been called for, a method of killing which would leave no witnesses behind. A scourge of smallpox had been the perfect answer to that, but his arrival had spoiled that plan. He hid his feelings.

"Anyway, you're getting better, Sam," he said. "I'm going to send somebody over to clean up your cabin. Make up your bunk fresh, and all. You've been too sick to do it before, but it needs it."

"Guess it could stand a touch of tidyin', for a fact," Kane agreed. "Have Tom do it, will you? Him and me get on fine."

McTigue readily agreed to the job. Busy in his own cabin, one which had been empty on his arrival, Doc worked for several hours. It was late afternoon when he went outside again. The glimmer of pale sun was setting in a frigid west, but there was an air of festive excitement in town over the impending banquet. Great preparations were going forward in the miner's hall, close by Peavey's store. Long tables had been set, stoves warmed the room. The cooking was being done in a back room.

Doc glanced in at the tables, then went on to Kanes' cabin. It ought to be all cleaned by now. He pushed open the door, stopped in bewilderment.

Instead of neatness, all was confusion. The interior of the cabin was a wreck. And Kane was huddled out in the middle of the floor,

blood making a brown stain down the side of his head.

He wasn't dead, but he was not far short of it. Doc got him back into the bunk. Then he set about trying to revive him. There was a half-filled bottle of whisky in the little cupboard, and it served its purpose. The sick man groaned, opened his eyes, and glared wildly about. Then his face cleared at sight of the medico.

"What happened?" Doc asked.

"Tom—found a blanket—in my bunk," Kane whispered. "I—never put it there. He said it was an Injun blanket—he'd seen it wrapped around a—dead Injun, buried in a tree, last fall—miles from here. He died—of smallpox—"

Kane's voice trailed off. Then he made a final effort.

"Tom—started to find you—"

It was too much. Kane's head fell back, exhausted. Doc covered him, then straightened, his face hard and cold. Now he had the picture, in all its dirty ugliness. That blanket, wrapped around a man who had died of the plague, had been brought to camp by Matt Peavey or one of his men who, having once recovered from the disease, were immune to it. It had been hidden under Kane's other blankets, where he had not discovered it, and so he had contracted smallpox. Which explained why no one else had come down with it at the same time.

THEN the six of them had planned, under the guise of necessity, to give it to all the camp in a virulent form which would kill like bullets. His arrival had spoiled that.

Seeing the blanket, McTigue had understood, and had started out to find him. But that must have been quite a while ago. McTigue had not arrived. And in the meantime, Peavey or some of his men had come here, and had understood as well! Kane had been left for dead—

Doc whirled toward the door, and saw that it was opening from the outside. Peavey's face, which looked now as though the cold had frozen it in a snarl, was framed there. And Peavey was starting to jerk off a mitten and grab for his gun.

Doc acted, on instinct. His hand closed on the Indian blanket and hurled the cursed thing with all his might. It draped across Peavey's shoulders before he could raise the gun, blinding him. Doc lunged ahead, bowled Peavey over, and was outside the cabin.

It had been Doc's intention, as he flung the blanket, to stop and settle things, there and then, man to man. The hot rage which filled him blotted out all fear of the man or the gun. But what he saw through the open door caused him to change his plans. He had little

doubt but what Tom McTigue was dead before this. And a pair of Peavey's henchmen were converging on the cabin, coming at a run. To linger here was to die.

Running, Doc reached the corner of the cabin, ducked around it. The others were pursuing, but they were not shooting. It was pretty cold for that, and they preferred not to raise an alarm if it could be helped. That was his salvation for the moment.

There was no one else in sight, the early winter dusk was closing down, the last yellow tinge of the sunset gone in bleakness. Doc knew that he had to reach the miners, and warn them. Warn them of what, he couldn't guess. But that it was something on a grim par with what had gone before, and somehow connected with the coming banquet, he was certain. And by now, the whole populace would be gathered in the hall, waiting for the dinner to be served.

Doc sprinted for the hall, saw that one of his pursuers was taking a short-cut and circling to cut him off, so that he couldn't reach the front door. He changed his own course, and plunged for the rear door, to the room where the cooking was being done. As he jerked it open, a hubbub of voices and laughter drifted to him from the big, crowded hall beyond, though the door in between was closed.

The dinner was nearly ready, cooking on a big stove. His first hasty glance made it look as if Peavey was really splurging. There was all sorts of stuff that the store contained, ready for serving. A big kettle-full of stew bubbled on the stove. One of the cooks was just emptying one of a number of cans of stuff into it, his back to Doc, and speaking to another man who was looking in a cupboard.

"These cans been standin' open all day long, in this hot room," he said. "Reckon they're ready tuh serve, eh. *Hot stuff!*"

Hot stuff! In a flash, Doc saw the whole scheme. Any canned goods, no matter how pure to begin with, if left to stand open in the can in a hot room for hours, was apt to go bad. It was certain that many of the cans would be contaminated by now, and they would leaven the whole kettle of stew. Yet there would be nothing in the taste to show that it was bad—nothing until the effects of mass poisoning began to take effect, later on.

Here was mass murder again. Only a doctor could save them, and he was scheduled to eat this with the rest of them! Months later, when a report had to be made to the outer world, Peavey and his men would blame it all, and rightly enough, on food poisoning, and would of course protest that they too had been desperately sick but had pulled through, and were the only survivors. And who would there be to contradict them?

"Right smart scheme uh Peavey's," the cook added, and then he turned suspiciously. So did Doc. Matt Peavey and his other two gunmen were plunging toward him from the back door, and Doc couldn't turn back. He tried a dash to reach the door beyond, to break in among the waiting crowd and shout a warning.

But that door opened before he could reach it, and Peavey's other man came through. He was the red-haired giant who had been aiding Peavey when Doc had first arrived in camp, and he was quick to grasp the situation.

Right now, Doc was of no mind to be stopped. He sent the big man reeling back with a short right to the chin, eluded one of the others. And then, just as he was reaching for the door know, the floor seemed to rock and pitch out from under his feet, and he found himself tumbling headlong into reaching darkness.

Doc had time for one startled yell, but he knew that it would not be heard. Nearly everyone in camp had finally been convinced, by this expansive gesture on Matt Peavey's part, that they had been wrong in their first opinion of him, and that he was really the benefactor he claimed to be. They were talking and laughing, and the noise they made would over-ride his yells, even if he should shout his head off now.

Striking a dirt floor about ten feet down, Doc landed sprawling, then picked himself up, gingerly, a bit ruefully. He wasn't much hurt by his tumble, he found, but he was in a bad way—and so was everyone else. Someone had been quick-witted enough to spring that trap-door, and now they had him.

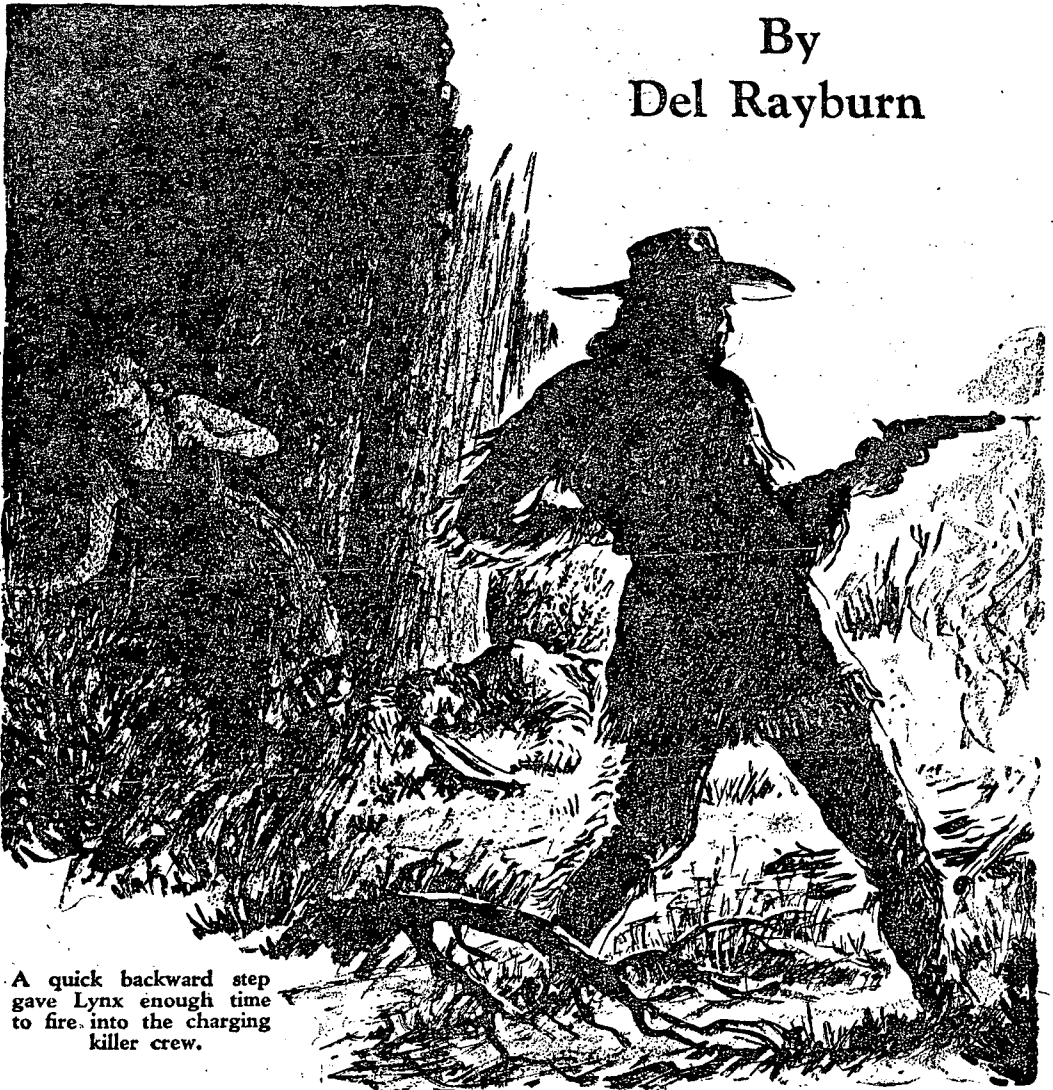
It was completely dark down here, but he soon discovered that the room was crowded. Apparently a lot of old boxes and barrels mostly empty, had been stored down here. Which, so far as he could figure, wasn't going to help any.

HE COULD think of no way of getting out, or of warning the crowd who were waiting for their dinner. Within a few more minutes, that contaminated stew would be served to them. It was a plan for wholesale murder which was even more sure to work than the smallpox scheme which he had frustrated, unless he could find a way to warn them, before they had eaten anything. But how? There seemed to be no way out of here, save by the trap door above.

The door up there was opening now, just a crack. Doc saw the gleam of light, then the door was quickly closed again. A sweetish, overpowering odor assailed his nostrils. Chloroform! Peavey was taking no chances. He had lost no time in raiding Doc's medicine

(Continued on page 96)

By
Del Rayburn



A quick backward step
gave Lynx enough time
to fire into the charging
killer crew.

SATAN SENDS THE BUCKSKIN BRIGADE

Chapter I

DEATH'S WELCOME

JUST ahead the wild Missouri plunged into the lazy Mississippi, creating an uproar that left 'the Father of Waters' with a muddy, roiled face to the very end of his way in the Gulf.

72

"I have seen nothing more frightful—," wrote the good Father Marquette in 1673, leaving the first record of a white man's reaction to the sight of an outlaw river's insane rage at being swallowed by a greater river. And here in 1856 there still was no reconciliation; the Missouri's attitude about the whole thing was just as frightful as ever.

But to Lynx Lesky, at the bow pole of his



A
Double-Barreled
Lynx Lesky
Novel

Lynx Lesky at last piloted his plew-laden mackinaw into St. Louis' roaring waterfront, where waited a golden fortune for his furs, and payment for a dead man's promise kept. . . . But the King of the Free Trappers and his unorthodox crew soon found that outpost dudes could be far more deadly than the frontier's most dangerous renegades.

long, heavily laden mackinaw, two thousand wild miles of navigation from the Great Falls on the upper river behind him, it was just one more stretch of rough water.

"Freeze onto that tiller, gals," he called over one broad shoulder to Diana Livingstone and Marie LaRoche, who were manning the rudder.

"If they get into trouble I'll take it over,"

Big Red O'Hara shouted, the increasing roar of the river almost drowning out even the mighty bellow of his great voice.

Like Lesky at the bow, Big Red stood at the stern with a ready pole, his great legs set and waiting for the fight to come. His great head was thrust out eagerly, red beard streaming over one muscle-slabb'd shoulder, his nose keening the tangy air.

And then he was down! He collapsed as if smitten by the silent touch of a great and invisible hand. He would have plunged into the angry river had not Marie's eyes been upon him. Quickly she sprang forward to catch him.

Across his broad forehead was the bloody track of a bullet. And though the river's raging voice had covered any following sound of gunshot, Marie's scream reached Lynx's ears.

He whipped a backward glance across his shoulder in answer to the stricken cry. And the action perhaps saved his life. He felt the fiery breath of a bullet fan past, leaving his cheek tingling.

Then out of the thin air the long fingers of one of his hands seemed to snatch a long barreled Dragoon. And only his keen eyes could have marked the wisp of smoke from the shoreward brush which betrayed the murderous attacker. Four times in rapid succession the heavy hammer of Lynx's gun fell. But though there was the reassuring buck of recoil against his palm each time, still a tingle of alarm jangled along his spine for his ears caught no more sound of his own gunshots than if they had been responsible for so many missfires.

He was gratified by a glimpse of agonized movement in the brush into which his lead had driven. And then the deck shot up beneath his feet, sending shock through his legs as the mackinaw hurtled headlong into the first white water and seemed to leap skyward, thrown upon the crest of the angry torrent.

Frantically Lynx dropped his treasured Dragoon Colt and grabbed the pole with both hands to right the heavily wallowing boat as the bow was sucked crazily downward so that they seemed almost to stand upright on one end. And then it slid into a deep trough and threatened to capsize them; sure death in the rock-rolling, tree-carrying torrent.

SHORT handed they had been with only the strength of two, physical giants though they both were, to guide and right the course of the great mackinaw. But now it was Lynx alone for the battle. And though the worst was past in a matter of scant minutes, Lynx's buckskins were limp with sweat when at last they shot clear of the raging white water. But even then he did not relax, still driving with all his surging power as he sent the heavy boat gliding shoreward.

"You gals keep your rifles ready," he cautioned when he had beached the mackinaw enough to hold it against the lazy drag of the current. He fished the dropped Dragoon from the water that had come aboard in the bow section; dried and cleaned it carefully, renewing its protecting coat of oil before he fed fresh lead to the cylinder. "I'm going to cut

for sign of a varmint," he explained tersely when the chore was finished. Then he headed into the deep woods that stretched away from the bank.

The first mile he backtracked at a rapid gait. Beyond there he moved with the patient caution of an ambushing Indian; for he was not far from the place in the screening brush where the treacherous rifleman who had downed Big Red had hidden.

But when he found the fellow it was plain that his caution had been needless. Three of Lynx's four shots had found the target.

Strangely, though, Lynx felt little satisfaction. For the fellow was a complete stranger, but not unseen before. He had been in the mercantile at the small upriver settlement where Lynx had put in the evening before to trade just enough beaver plew so that Diana and Marie could buy more fitting clothing than buckskin before they hit St. Louis.

"Mighty fine beaver," the trader had nodded grudgingly when Lynx had offered him three of the richly sheened prime furs in trade for the two girls' wardrobe.

"You'll never see any better," Lynx told him.

"Used to come like that by the pack-loads from the Upper Yellow and the Green River. But no more," the trader declared gloomily. "Where'd yuh take these—if that ain't asking too much?"

"Oregon Territory," Lynx had replied non-committally.

"That's a mighty big piece of country," the trader had primed cautiously.

"Yep," was all the further information he got out of Lesky, however.

But this stranger, who had tried to kill Big Red and Lynx as they hurtled toward the mouth of the Missouri, where the wild river really showed its teeth, had been standing at one side during the conversation. And though no word had passed his lips, Lynx had not missed the sudden interest that had come alive in his dark, muddy eyes at the first mention of Oregon Territory.

Lynx had wondered briefly about it at the time; and then had forgotten it as one of the many trivial and unexplainable matters a man may encounter in the course of a day. But now, looking down at the death-twisted snarl of the treacherous fellow's swarthy face, Lynx found himself confronted with a puzzle he was not apt to forget.

"Could old Beaver Ruck still have men hired and loking for our scalps—this close to Saint Looley?" he muttered to himself, his mind flashing back over the treachery on their backtrail, marked by violence ever since Scot Livingstone, Diana's father, had opposed Ruck's ruthless scheming—and lost his life for his troubles. But not before he had ex-

tracted from Lynx a pledge to carry on his fight and responsibilities.

A forced march had taken Lynx and the twenty-odd free trappers Livingstone led, with Diana, across the Main Range and safely beyond Beaver Ruck's menace—so Lynx had thought. But though he had never relaxed his guard against it, that menace seemed always to catch up, however fast and far he traveled. Of the original party which the satanic Oregon country Hudson's Bay headfactor seemed determined to wipe out, only Lynx and Diana remained. Big Red had been saved from the vengeance of a like-minded trader of similar power on the upper Missouri. And Marie from a renegade squawman, leader of a pillaging band of young Indians, who had forced her French father to sell her like the Indians among whom he lived sold their maidens. Thus the depleted strength of the free-trapper party had been replenished by accepting the dangers of others under similar menace for their very lives.

But the added dangers each of them brought with them had each in time been outdistanced. Only the old menace of Beaver Ruck's vengeful power seemed still able to pace them, however impossible it might seem. For this unexpected attack by the sign of its mystery and treachery had the mark of his doing.

IN the timber nearby Lynx found a saddled horse. His hide was streaked white with the salt of sweat, the hair lay stiff and hard with dried lather; plain sign that the horse had been ridden hard and fast and that the site of ambush had been chosen beforehand.

For a moment Lynx considered. He was in a land supposedly ruled by law and order, now. If he buried the body and it was found, the very consideration might be construed as an admission of murder. If he took the body to the law, he might himself be jailed for his troubles. If he tied the fellow across his saddle and let his horse take him in, it would only arouse an investigation sooner if his death would cause one. He certainly owed the treacherous ambusher no consideration.

He tied the reins to the saddlehorn and slapped the horse across the rump. Let the Law, or the ambusher's friends, find their own dead and solve their own puzzles.

Back at the mackinaw Lynx found that Big Red had come around. He was taking it easy, stretched out in the shade.

"Well, our friend won't be bothering us any more," Lynx announced casually. "He held the low hand this time."

"Goshalmighty, man!" Big Red exclaimed, his rumbling tone full of concern. "I hope you don't actually mean you killed him? I owe that feller a heap of thanks, don't you know! He's saved me a whole pile of money. He's

give me a headache that'd cost me maybe a thousand dollars, or more—if I'd had to take myself on a big drunk to get it."

"I'm afraid I didn't have time to size up his virtues at the time he was handing you that big favor, pardner," Lynx chuckled. "Maybe I'm just too impulsive?"

He turned to the girls then. "You gals skin off there to a shady nook in the timber and get into your new duds," Lynx directed. "Saint Looney's less than twenty miles away now. It's all easy going. You'd just as well hit town looking your best. Might bump into someone you know."

"And what about yourself?" Diana suggested.

"Ho, I don't need fancy clothes to impress the folks I meet," Lynx drawled with a guarded wink at Big Red. "It just depends on what it is about you that attracts folks' interest, clothes or personality."

"No danger of that Lesky ever suffering loneliness, is there," Diana remarked in a pointed aside. "Not while someone gives him such *blind* love as that."

"Finishing school females are just too immune to reason," Lynx goaded. "Go on now, get yourself fluffed up in those frilly duds like they taught you to. We'll have to make Saint Looney before dark or no one'll see you and it'll be just so much wasted effort."

"Hardship, tribulation, danger and treachery, these we can endure, surmount, or leave behind us," Diana sighed with resignation. "But Lesky's quaint sense of humor and indestructible egotism, these like the babbling of a brook go on forever."

"The gal just doesn't understand me," Lynx mocked mournfully. Quickly he added: "But don't start trying to now. I'm in a hurry. So get along and quit gabbing."

"You sound like a man anticipating a most welcome relief," Diana declared unruffled. "Remember, you promised father not only to see me safe in St. Louis but also situated with the kind of complete security I've always been accustomed to."

"That's what comes of making promises too quick and easy," Lynx declared heavily. "Why do you think I want you looking your best when we hit Saint Looney—surely you can trap something wearing pants that's got enough under his hair, or where his hair used to be, to keep you set up like a lady—and still not enough but what he'll *want* to give up his freedom to do it for you. Otherwise I guess I'm just stuck for—"

An exasperated gasp escaped Diana. She snatched a chunk of driftwood from the sand of the river bank and hurled it at Lesky, cutting his jibing short.

Lynx ducked frantically, throwing up an arm to ward off the driftwood. But it found

its mark, catching his square across the back of the neck and shoulders and disintegrating there in a mess of rotten wood punk and sand that showered down Lynx's neck before he could brush it away.

"Now look what you did," he accused, choking down his laughter, his eyes gay with satisfaction at having aroused Diana to the action. "Got me dirty as a hog. So clear out—" he began stripping off his buckskins. "I got to shuck down and take a bath now."

HE seemed to have the upper hand of the situation, for Diana retreated immediately with no further argument or protest. And Marie went with her, still laughing gaily. These bouts were something she and Big Red had come to anticipate, never failing, as they did, to relieve the monotony of constant tension that had marked every mile of unexpected dangers or treachery of their long downriver trip.

But Big Red, usually the gay and carefree one of the party, was strangely sober and thoughtful a few moments later when Lesky emerged, dripping, from the river. Lynx had dried and was donning a fresh smelling outfit of new buckskin before O'Hara said, almost hesitantly:

"How come, Lynx, even though you're kidding, sometimes you're almost downright mean to that gal in the way you say things?"

Lynx's eyes flashed up. For a long quiet moment Big Red returned his straight gaze, though uneasily.

"She loves me," Lesky declared quietly. It seemed that he thought that covered it. But Big Red persisted.

"That the way a feller talks to a gal that loves him?"

"I love her too," Lynx said in the same abrupt and decisive way.

"That the way a feller talks to a gal he loves?" Big Red insisted. Lynx eyed him again for a moment.

"Neither one of us got any more business loving the other than an Injun's got with a beaver hat," Lynx declared in the same voice. "Scot intended her to be a lady. Her mother was a lady. She's been raised and educated the same way. But losing her mother young, she wanted to know more of her paw. It was partly just as a lark after the solid years of school that she insisted on going up the river with Scot his last trip, but it was mostly to be with him a little. And so now she's lost him and she knows that bucking the wilderness is too damned serious business to be any lark. So she'll be ready to settle down—and settle her man down with her. She won't be for the kind of life her folks had, man up the river and wife in town. How long do you think I'd last in town?"

"Together you'll have a pile of money. You could set up in the trading business for yourself."

"How long would you last in town?" Lynx continued, relentlessly driving his point home.

"That's different," O'Hara hedged. "I got no sense in town. I just get drunk. I never been in town enough to know how to do anything else. You have. You got nigh as much, if not more, book learning than Diana—though you ain't never told me so. I know it. You could—"

"And I still left the towns," Lynx pointed out. "That makes me like them less, if anything, than you. Maybe you'd like them if you'd been raised to them. How do you know? But I know. And I left them. And I'm not ready to go back. Not to stay. I'm for living mine in mountain country—where I've got room."

That seemed to settle the discussion. Lynx finished his dressing. He listened a moment to be sure the girls were not yet returning before he said:

"I can't be outright mean to Diana. I got no call to be—and couldn't if I had. But I can just sort of rile her up from time to time being a little too pointed with my kidding. Not to hurt—because you can't hurt a girl with her pride—but just aggravate. She'll forget easier, then, when she meets the right town man. She'll remember my cussedness and be glad to."

"Do you really figure she will?" Big Red demanded, skeptically.

Chapter II

WOLF IN A FOX HIDE

A HOT sun blazed in a cloudless sky when Lynx Lesky and his little party reached the upriver outskirts of St. Louis' busy waterfront. Even at midday the whole area as far as they could see was alive with activity. Great river steamers taking on or discharging cargo. Lines of scantily clad, chanting stevedores, their ebony hides gleaming with sweat. Keelboats at other landings and their hard eyed, scar faced boatmen.

Lynx drove the nose of the mackinaw shoreward, coming in above that milling scene of boats and men and tying up there.

"You think we ought to look up this Paul Chenault fellow then, do you?" he turned to Diana when the mackinaw was securely tied.

"Father always traded with Paul, that's all I know," Diana replied frankly. "Father trusted him I think—and he didn't trust many St. Louis traders. I think he's about as near a friend as father had downriver. He was here so seldom that—" she broke off with a shrug. "Well, how about it, Big Red," Lynx

asked, "are you ready to start floating the stick for yourself again—or would you just as soon stay together for a while yet? I can't leave the boat alone and I hate to send Diana to look up Chenault's headquarters by herself. But I'm making no call on you if you've got any other plans."

"Nary a plan," Big Red's mighty beard bobbed as he chuckled, then winched, his gay blue eyes narrowing against a twinge of pain. He patted the bandage Marie had put on his head, touching it gingerly. "Like I said, our poor unfortunate friend upriver accommodated me with enough of a headache, that town's a waste of my time. I couldn't tote no more, so I ain't feeling playful. I'll watch the plew."

Lynx's eyes turned to Marie. "One place is as good as another for me to spend my time," she smiled quietly. "I have no plans—and no place to go. I'm almost sorry we're here. It's been a good time since we all came together—even if it has had its dangers. I'd like it to last as long as it can. I'll wait with Big Red. Let's not take our separate ways any sooner than we have to."

Displaying a rare impulsive gesture, Diana went to Marie and hugged her. "It has been a good time," she murmured. "Let's you and I stick together even if these two buckskin scallawags do desert us."

"You're a mighty pretty pair in your new fixings," Lynx murmured, taking no trouble to conceal his admiration for the picture they presented. Of a size, and dressed like sisters, only their coloring and their temperaments contrasted; Diana blond and tanned light copper, quick to show pride and spirit, Maria, Latin dark and humbly thankful for kind treatment.

"You've neither one any cause for worry about the trail ahead," Lynx declared. "This town will give you any kind of man you want. All you'll have to do is just call, so don't settle for anything short of it. We'll all stay to-

gether until you're straightened around and know what you want to do."

"And what if the man one of us wants to take is too *honorable* to let us take him?" Diana asked quickly, pointedly. "What shall we settle for then, King Solomon?"

"We'd better look up that trader," Lynx declared, turning on his heel. "Come on. Maybe we can get this fur off of our hands before another night."

"I almost hope we don't," Diana declared, joining him, taking his arm. "It's the fur that holds us together."

"If that's all, then it won't matter much when it's gone and so no longer holds us," Lynx drawled, his eyes keeping to the street ahead. A silence grew up between them.

AFTER wending their way through the maze of organized turmoil, rubbing shoulders with men of every race, creed and color who thronged the bustling river-front, they came at last to the imposing establishment of Paul Chenault and Company.

"Looks like friend Paul is quite a fellow," Lynx observed, sizing up the place.

"He has done very well, I guess," Diana nodded. "Especially for a comparatively young man."

"Young, huh?" Lynx's eyes narrowed speculatively.

"Think you can marry me off to him?" Diana challenged.

"I don't know—we'll see," Lynx murmured casually.

Momentary irritation blazed in Diana's eyes. Then she walked with Lynx on toward the office door, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Inside the plain, high-ceilinged sparsely furnished room they saw a hulking bruiser of a man hunched over a sturdy desk. He was studying a spread of cards before him, a man even more massive than Lynx but lacking the trapper's proportionate grace.

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The man raised a plainly disinterested eye. The glance acquired a contemptuous gleam at the sight of Lynx's buckskin clothing. The trapper looked out of place.

"You got no business here, trapper," he growled, his eyes resuming their intent scrutiny of the cards before him. "The boss don't deal with no lone wolf independents like you. Move along."

"I think Chenault will want to see us," Lynx replied quietly, unperturbed. "This young lady is a friend of his."

"Go on!" The eyebrow jumped again, the fellow's heavy lips twisting downward in a disgusted and pitying smirk. "The boss' lady friends—don't drag their brothers—or some other cluck along with them when they come visiting." The fellow's tone and inflections were as heavy with insinuation as an intended insult. His black brows leveled again as his eyes went back to his cards. But Lynx still kept his patience.

"Maybe if that's the way of it then perhaps I should have said she is a *family* friend," Lynx declared pointedly.

"Look—" there was outright irritation in the fellow's murky eye as it raised this time. To Lynx it was apparent that verbal argument was going to avail nothing with this watchdog. His was the kind of simple, one-track mind that once given orders carried them out—regardless. "—am I gonna have to—"

"No!" Lynx purred. And then was in action so quickly that the only reaction the watchdog had time for was to bat his eyes in unbelief and dismay. Lynx had him by the shirt front, half dragged across the desk before he knew what had happened. Then Lynx's fist sledged into his whisker stubbled jaw, reversing the direction of his unwilling movement, slamming him back so hard that his big bulldog head drummed against the back wall with a reverberating thud.

The door beside the fellow popped open and a dark skinned, black haired man of a height about equal Diana's burst out. Even in anger he had a dandified air of importance and a banty cock's stance.

"What goes on here?" he demanded in a voice of surprising resonance. Then sight of his watchdog still hanging groggily against the wall aroused an outraged: "See here! I'll have the law—"

The watchdog had recovered and launched himself from the wall, perhaps desperate to restore himself in the eyes of his employer. Though lacking Lynx's supple grace, he closed upon Lesky with surprising speed for one who appeared so muscle-bound and ungainly, charging in with chin hugging his chest, ham-like hands doubled into massive fists, a two-legged bull closing for the kill.

But Lynx sidestepped lightly, one hand snatching one of the heavy chairs by the back. Snapping it up over his shoulder, Lynx brought the heavy chair down across the back of the watchdog's head and neck in a splintering blow that had come so quickly the fellow made no move to ward it off. He dropped like a collapsing sack, the floor trembling as his bulk crashed upon it. The splintered wreckage of the heavy chair littered his back and the floor beside him.

"LYNX," it was Diana's cool voice that sounded upon the heels of the crash, "I want you to meet Mister Paul Chenuault. Mister Chenault, this is Oregon free trappers' brigade leader, Lynx Lesky."

Lynx nodded casually in acknowledgment. But the dark, primly tailored little man in the inner office door gaped, his brown eyes widening with wonder.

"It can't be!" he gasped, falteringly, as if short of breath. "Diana Livingstone! But it can't be. You don't look at all like—like the—fragile lily—I met when Scot Livingstone was outfitting here before his trip up the river two years ago. But—" he rushed forward, small, soft and carefully kept right hand outstretched eagerly.

"But it is," Diana finished for him, her hand going out to meet his. "But she clasped his hand in a firm grip and shook it in a business-like fashion like a man, instead of letting him raise it to his lips as he had plainly intended.

"And your father?" Chenault asked. "What was it about this young man being the brigade leader?"

"Father's dead," Diana declared soberly but with no trace of emotion. "Before he died, he turned over his—plans—and responsibilities to Lynx Lesky here." Her eyes raised to Lynx's face, seeking his eyes as she added: "No other man could have handled them."

"Oh I'm so sorry—" Chenault whipped around to eye Lynx, his actions quick and bird-like, a driving energy in a small body. "Sorry about—"

"I'm sorry about breaking up your chair," Lynx cut in with a casual murmur, nodding toward the prostrated watchdog. "Seeing as there was sort of a misunderstanding, I figured the quicker we all sorta quieted down and got acquainted, the better. It was sorta hard on the chair, though."

"Brule is a good man, in his way," Chenault murmured apologetically. Then with a slight shrug: "He's just a bit slow sometimes at figuring out the unexpected for himself. He'll be all right." With that he dismissed the plight of the fallen receptionist, turning to gesture toward the inner office.

"Come on in where we can talk."

When the door was closed behind them and Lynx and Diana were each seated in one of the luxuriously easy chairs that graced the room, Chenault asked directly:

"What are your plans then, Diana, with your father gone?" Lynx noticed that the man displayed no more surprise or regret than if the death of a man like Scot Livingstone was a commonplace occurrence.

"I have made no plans, not just yet," Diana replied. "We have business to attend to and—well, there's always plenty of time to make plans, now that we're where each bush doesn't represent a possibility of danger."

"Then I'm going to insist that you make my home your headquarters until you have had time to make some plans," Paul Chenault declared quickly, going on though Diana's head began a slight negative gesture. "Mother and Aunt Anette complain endlessly because they have nothing to occupy their time but to look after me—and the servants do most of that. It would be like a gift, to them—having you to fuss over for awhile."

"No." Diana declined kindly but firmly. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness and hospitality, but I want to stay with the others—for awhile yet, until we have to part. We've been through a lot together, and—"

"Well, perhaps you could *all* stay with me a little while," Chenault suggested, but not so enthusiastically as before, Lynx noticed. "I have a big house you know. Where are the other men? How many of them are they?"

"Lynx and I are all of father's brigade still alive," Diana explained. "We were joined later on the Missouri by another free trapper with whom we escaped a common danger, and still later under similar circumstances by others, one a French girl who had been kidnapped by renegades that attacked us. She and the other trapper were the only ones that finished the trip with us. And just this morning Big Red, the other trapper, almost lost his life when we were attacked from the shore upriver."

"You lost the greater part of the plew your father's brigade had taken, then—I suppose?" Chenault sympathized.

"We began the trip with sixty packhorse loads," Diana smiled faintly, "and we arrived here with about seventy-five. Big Red has another five. We lost one mackinaw but no fur."

Chenault glanced at Lynx, his bright eyes half unbelieving.

Lynx nodded. "The last big catch that will ever come out of the Rockies. Over one hundred thousand dollars worth, as scarce as prime fur is these days. That's why the blood flowed so freely."

"This I must see," Chenault murmured. "But it can wait until tomorrow. Where are your friends and the boats? I'll send a man

to bring them. The fur will be safe locked inside my keelboat dock under my warehouse, so there'll be no need to guard it or to unload until tomorrow. So let me send my man—"

"No," Lynx got up from his chair, "that won't be necessary. They're folks who aren't used to town and they'd feel better if I come back myself. I would too, if I were them. So—"

"Well then," Chenault interrupted quickly, "let me take you two up the hill to my house first so they'll know I have company coming and can get ready. Then you'll know where the house is and can take the others on up when you're ready," he turned to Lynx. "It's still pretty early in the day; I really shouldn't leave the office for good quite yet."

When Lynx and Diana nodded he excused himself quickly, explaining: "I'll have my carriage brought. I'll only be a minute."

WHEN Chenault stepped into the outer office and closed the door on Lynx and Diana behind him, Brule Bayard was sitting in the midst of the wreckage of the chair, where he had lain. He was still groggy. But the fuzz seemed to clear from his mind instantly as he sighted his dapper little employer. He scrambled up, grimacing a little against the pain movement caused, and followed in answer to Chenault's gesture.

Outside, after a wary glance around, Chenault stopped and turned to speak to the swarthy faced Bayard in a guarded tone.

"Here's your chance to get back at that feller that broke the chair over your head. Now listen closely."

"Sure, boss!" Interest flamed to life in the burly henchman's muddy eyes.

"Somewhere on the upriver side of town you'll find a big mackinaw, towing a bull-boat I guess, and there'll be a girl and a big trapper with them. Big Red, they called him. Take a jug of spiked bourbon, the best you can get, and a jug of rotgut. You sample the spiked stuff first and give him the rotgut, so he won't be suspicious and'll be glad to keep it and drink enough to go out quick when you swap with him. Got it?"

"Sure, boss." Savage delight was coming to life in Bayard's murky eyes.

"Pick up three, four hard-luck boatmen that don't know us. When the Big Red fellow is out, kid the girl along or whatever's necessary, but get those boats up river and hid away on Voodoo Island. Then tonight we'll take care of this other fellow. I want it to look like he and Big Red took the fur and lit out."

"This the outfit from Oregon?" Bayard asked suddenly, a look of comprehension lighting his dark face.

Chenault answered with a short nod. "When

I marry that girl we'll control the last virgin fur country, and when we've stripped it we'll have enough to go into the Missouri steamer business in a big way," he declared, his voice little more than a harsh whisper. "But that fellow with her is no pushover and I can see she's gone on him. I've got to show him up. Now don't make any slips. Get those boats and do it quick. He'll be along looking for them himself pretty quick, so move!"

"Say! Wasn't Green River up the country on the lookout for this outfit?" Brule demanded, swinging back just as he had been starting off on his mission of treachery. "He wouldn't miss them. Wonder why he ain't shown up to tell us they was coming?"

"That don't matter just now," Chenault said tersely. "You keep your mind on your own job and get it done. Pronto!"

He watched while Bayard faded out of sight. Then he went to the company barn and directed the hostler to have his coach brought out. He then returned to the office.

"I've been thinking," he began hesitantly when he had rejoined Lynx and Diana, "you know how people are about—convention—that sort of thing; older people like mother and Aunt Annette and their friends and others here in town who knew your people, Diana. It's foolish, but some of them would be sure to raise questions about—well, you understand—two men and women making such a long trip together. It could be avoided if you will indulge in a white lie with me and let me take some old woman with us and say she accompanied you. Just to introduce her with you would satisfy their pious minds. She can come right back with Mister Lesky and me then—going on to relatives, you know. Something like that."

"For my part I'm not interested in what—" Diana began.

"I reckon it could do no harm and as your guests I suppose it would make your women folks feel better about everything," Lynx put in, cutting Diana's opinion short.

"It should take me but a minute to get her and the carriage should be ready by then," the trader declared and then breezed out a second time.

Behind, Lynx indulged himself in a quiet smile at the man's obvious relief at gaining his consent to this hypocrisy, remembering the watchdog's insinuating remarks about Chenault's visits from lady friends. He looked away from the closed door, beyond which the trader had again disappeared, to find Diana's questioning eyes upon him and almost indignant.

"We're back in civilization," Lynx answered with a chuckle and a shrug. "See why I steer clear of it all I can. And besides, his charwoman can likely use an extra dollar."

"What do you think of him?" Diana asked. "I think any hypocrite can stand close watching," Lynx returned frankly. "Why're they so doubtful that anyone else can be expected to do what's right without it—unless they need it?"

Chapter III

WOMAN KILLER

CHENAULT'S house was a great, gray stone place constructed along the elegant lines of the day. High on the bluffs, with the rest of the well-to-do residential section it overlooked the dingy but hustling commercial section crowded along the river below.

Diana was delivered into the excited and pleasantly clucking custody of Chenault's mother and her sister; plain but good hearted appearing old ladies both, but clearly suffering boredom from ease to which they were not accustomed. They even made somewhat over the poor, hardship marked old woman whom Chenault had supplied for the role of chaperon, or fellow traveling companion during Diana's long downriver voyage. But that poor old worthy was stone deaf and intelligent enough, however unlettered she might have been, to say little. Therefore the hoax was a complete success, and Chenault engineered her departure with Lynx and himself just as quickly as possible.

Taking them from the lordly atmosphere of the bluffs, the carriage rolled back into the lowland, not pulling up until they were secure in the concealing confines of Chenault's own livery driveway. There he scrambled out, immediately digging into one pocket with a rather begrudging expression upon his willful little face. He offered not even a pretense of help to the old woman who had started to alight behind him. But Lynx laid a gently restraining hand upon her bony old shoulder.

"Wait, mother, I'll help you down," he murmured, then sprang out of the carriage on the other side, coming around to give her his hand and assist her to the ground.

Meantime Chenault had been sorting out a handful of change and he now extended a few coppers to the old woman. But once more Lynx did not allow his action to pass.

"Do you reckon you could extend me credit for a dollar against our furs," he murmured. And then without seeming to have moved he held one of his heavy, beautifully matched Dragoon Colts in his hand, proposing: "Or better yet, take my gun for security and advance me five."

Chenault jumped, startled by the suddenness of the gun's appearance. Vain as he was, that momentary loss of poise perhaps added to his resultant attitude of displeasure.

"Give her that much money and someone'll be wondering where she got it."

"Some folks can have money without advertising it," Lynx insisted. "I'd hate to do something I felt was so underhanded that I couldn't do right by the folks that helped me."

With a poor show of grace Chenault shrugged his narrow shoulders. He started to reach for Lynx's gun, then seemed to think better of it, withdrawing his hand without receiving it. Reluctantly bringing a fat wallet from his inside coat pocket, he extracted a bill of the denomination Lynx had asked for and handed it over.

"You needn't bother," he waved Lynx's gun aside testily. "I can trust you."

"You flatter me," Lynx murmured with a mocking nod of acknowledgment. Then he turned to the old woman, and held the bill before her. Incredulosity, longing brightened her eyes as they widened at sight of the money. Chenault shrugged, nodding toward the waiting coach:

"Hadn't you better be going to bring the other people?" Chenault asked.

"Thanks, but I'll walk," Lynx smiled pleasantly. "Your horses might need an extra hand of grain or bite of hay if I put them to that trouble. No need of being wasteful, you know." Jerking a crooked index finger toward his brow in an informal parting salute, he turned on his moccasin heel and headed with noiseless footsteps toward the outside street.

Behind, bantam-cocky little Paul Chenault glowered at the retreating trapper's broad, straight back.

THE quiet backwater where Lynx had brought the mackinaw to shore was still roiled from the mud scraped off the bank into it by the boat being shoved back into the river. Plainly it had not been long gone. For a moment Lynx stood puzzling as to what had prompted Bid Red to shove off. Then his musing eye, without conscious direction, instinctively glanced at the ground roundabout for

sign. And sign there was aplenty. Unlike wilderness renegades, red or white, in the vast country up-river, who were masters of sign savvy themselves and therefore always cautious about it, the thugs whose sign Lynx found here had been unmindful of it and therefore had left plenty.

Under the tree where Big Red had been seated enjoying the shade when Lynx and Diana started for the main part of town, Lynx now found a plain imprint in the mellow earth. He found too, the round imprint the bottom of a jug had made as O'Hara rested it between drinks. To Lynx's mind that explained the presence of the several sets of later footprints that ended abruptly where their owners had stepped aboard the boat.

After that it took but a moment's figuring before Lynx set off up-river. So many men would not have been necessary had Big Red's crafty assailant intended to merely float down stream. Too, he had gotten frequent glimpses of the river as he walked the waterfront; he was certain he would not have missed sight of the mackinaw had it gone down river.

Moving quickly, but in a way that would attract no special attention, Lynx made his way through the shanty-town settlement that sprawled along the bank above. Suddenly Lynx heard a piercing scream. This was not the time of day men beat their wives. He broke into a run.

A moment later Lynx rounded a kink in the snaking track that served as a street between the jumbled shacks. He barely escaped a collision with an equally hurried and excited mass of untidy female corpulence.

"A man's wrecking my house," she wailed, as if recognizing in Lynx a champion. "He says she's his wife, but I never saw them before and he's wrecking my house trying to get her. My poor little house! Make them go home if he wants to beat her." Her multiple chins quivered with outrage and grief. Tears welled in her eyes.

But Lynx did not pause to comfort her. He

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sprinted toward the house. Reaching the door and bursting through, he found the first cubby-hole like room empty. But the sound of strained breathing reached him from somewhere near. He went across the dirt floor of the first cramped little room on noiseless feet, coming to the inside door in its far corner, just in time to see Marie elude the grasping clutch of a bull-shouldered brute of a man whose back was toward Lynx.

But Marie caught sight of her friend and the light of hope fired her eyes. She snatched out a small but razor-edged knife as she warily maneuvered along her side of a heavy, make-shift table across which she was fending off the hungry hands of her assailant. At sight of the knife he lunged headlong across the top of the table toward her, like an outraged animal pouncing upon an antagonist. And for his trouble Marie laid the flesh of one cheek and the muscle of one arm open to the bone with two quick and skillful strokes, dodging clear of him again in spite of the violence of his attack.

A roar of pain and rage crossed the renegade's lips as he hit the floor on the far side of the table and rolled to his feet, his face gory with his own blood and one arm hanging useless. Lynx caught his first sight of the fellow's face then and was surprised to recognize Chenault's man, Brule Bayard, his murky eyes glittering with insane fury.

And then Lynx was plunging forward in desperation, hurling a handy chair before him to jar the renegade until he could reach him. But too late he had realized Bayard's murderous intent. The gleaming throwing knife that had flashed into the fellow's hand whipped back and then forward toward its mark before even the chair struck him.

Bayard stumbled sideways under the impact of the chair. For the first time he became aware of Lynx's presence. And just before Lynx could close upon him he lurched into the wall behind him, got his balance, and came away from it in a twisting lunge that eluded Lynx and carried him across the room where he lunged through a window and was gone.

Lynx would have gone after him, but Marie was needing attention. Bayard's murderous long blade had missed the heart for which he had plainly intended it, but it had sliced through the flesh of Marie's shoulder, below the collar bone, and pinned her to the wall behind. Her face was pale, even through her tan, and tensely lined. Her eyes were glassy with pain, her teeth clenched upon her lower lip as she fought off a faint. But the pain and shock were too much for her.

Gently Lynx gathered the unconscious girl in his arms and crossed the few steps to the table. At the moment it seemed the handiest place to dress her wound. As he freed his

arms of her weight he noticed the dampness left upon his buckskins and for the first time became aware of Marie's bedraggled and still dripping appearance, as if she had not long ago been in the river.

But leaving speculation to the future and turning to be about the business of the moment, getting the knife wound cleansed and bandaged, Lynx found himself confronted by the corpulent owner of the driftwood mansion.

"Can you get me some hot water in a jiffy?" he demanded with no preliminaries. "This girl's been knifed and needs tending to."

"Are you gonna mess up my poor little house some more?" was the protesting wail that answered him. "Look at my window—my chair—my poor little house. I—"

"Get me some hot water!" Lynx said sharply.

There was no further dissension.

Chapter IV

FAT IN THE FIRE

LYNX returned to the Chenault mansion by way of the spacious grounds at its rear, reaching a small service entrance unobserved. He let himself in as stealthily as if he had been entering the lodge of the head chief in a hostile Indian camp. Moving like a drifting shadow, he found his way quickly to a back stair which took him to the upper hall and the spacious guest room where Diana had been installed.

Pausing with his fingers upon the door knob, Lynx listened a moment to make certain neither of the old women or any of the maids were there with Diana. When he was satisfied, he knocked guardedly, then tried the latch and found it unlocked. He swung the door open enough to slip inside, then shut it as quickly behind him.

"So there you are!" Diana's voice came to him, strangely loud as if she were trying to act and overdoing it, and as if she had expected him. Lynx turned from the door to eye her, a finger raised to his lips in a gesture asking a quieter tone. But Diana went on, as loud and woodenly as before, as if speaking lines from a play. And her stance matched her words, standing stiffly as she did at the far side of the head of her bed across the room from him. A window was not far from her side. "I saw you sneaking across the grounds through the window," she declared in the same phony, loud tone.

"Sneaking across the grounds through the window," Lynx mocked quietly, not yet understanding what the game was about, but moving quickly across the room toward her.

"How did I manage it?" he asked.

"Always full of smart talk, aren't you, you white savage you?" That sounded almost sincere, except that Lynx saw a glint of humor instead of malice in Diana's eyes. Then his eye was caught by the piece of paper in her hands with which she was making slight, furtive signs to attract his attention. He brushed past her, going to the window but receiving the paper as he passed. "That's what Paul called you," Diana continued. *"He was just here not five minutes ago telling me what a vile trick you've pulled on me, having Big Red and Marie steal the boats with all my fur. I suppose you're going to deny it?"*

For a moment Lynx made no answer, apparently peering outside through the window. But it was Diana's note that had his attention: *"Chenault is hiding in the closet. Saw you coming from the window. Shall we lead him on? What is up, anyhow?"*

Chenault's presence here made it plain that Bayard had contacted him since the attack on Marie. And therefore it was not unlikely the fellow had other men nearby to back his hand. Lynx had come to get Diana, wanting to get her clear before she could be menaced. But forcing a showdown now would invite unnecessary hazard to her well being. It took him but an instant to size up the situation and decide it best to make a pretense of abandoning her. When Chenault was gone he could slip back and they could do a vanishing act after dark.

Turning from the window, Lynx saw that Diana had chosen a position which placed them beyond the line of vision of anyone behind the closet door. He passed her a sly wink as he said:

"I suppose you're going to make a scene!"

Lynx crossed to the closet door and turned there to lean his broad shoulders against it, closing it firmly. "I only wish your little friend was still here. I'd ask him if he told you about sending his overgrown office boy with a whiskey jug to get Big Red drunk."

"I don't believe it!" Diana declared hotly. "Why would Paul do such a thing as that?"

"I'd ask him if he'd told you where his flunkey was to take the boats and fur, after Big Red passed out," Lynx droned on. "Did he tell you about Marie getting wise and diving overboard and swimming ashore? Or how his choreboy went after her and got all carved up for his trouble? Or that he stabbed Marie, too, before I showed up to chase him off?"

"You probably had a gang of ruffians helping you," Diana declared, affecting enough contempt in her voice to cover the concern and questioning look in her eyes. "I think you're despicable, Lynx Lesky, trying to spread lies against the name of a man like Paul. He said he'd recover my fur if it was

the last thing he did. Why did you come back here, anyhow?"

"I came to get you. Marie talked me out of deserting you. After all, you'll be broke without any fur," Lynx shrugged elaborately. "Chenault's man had his chance at it when he got Big Red drunk, but he won't get another. My men have it now and we're onto Chenault's hero act. And when he knows your fur's gone for god he won't keep up his hero act long, either. He's too tight to board you around here long if he knows there's nothing in it for him."

"Why you dog!" Diana kept up the act with her voice, but she plainly was becoming more puzzled by Lynx's talk the farther he went. "Just because your only interest in marrying me is for money you needn't think that's all another man would want me for. Paul has already asked me, fur or no fur." She made a quick face at Lynx in answer to the flash of surprise that information brought to his eyes.

"Shorty sure must be a fast worker, anyhow," Lynx declared. "But who said anything about marrying you, anyhow. I just come to get you, not to marry you. Are you coming along with me?"

"Leave this fine house and the company of a gentleman—to go heaven knows where with a brazen—a brazen ruffian, like you," Diana exclaimed in a voice of outraged exasperation, really laying it on thick. "I should say not!"

"Well, it don't really make me a lot of difference," Lynx shrugged. "With Marie knifed we could use someone to nurse her and do the cooking, you know. I just thought I'd see if you'd like the job, but if you don't—" he crossed from the closet door, against which he had leaned, to the hall door, his footsteps not making a sound. He seemed to be leaving without another word. But he turned back, stopping in the open door in the act of stepping into the hall outside.

"I'll try and stick around somewhere until your wedding," he gave Diana a sly wink, "so I can send my compliments with a wedding present. I'll send a stool—so Shorty'll have something to climb up on when he wants to kiss you."

Diana clapped a hand over her mouth, not quite knowing whether to appear outraged or to repress a laugh. And then without a sound the hall door closed and Lynx was gone.

BUT not far. Across the hall Lynx spied the narrow door of a broom and mop closet. He stepped into it quickly and drew the door almost shut, holding it with the tip of his knife, for there was no inside knob to release the latch if it was completely closed.

He was none too quick, either. For a moment later the door of Diana's room across

the hall burst open as Chenault rushed out. The little fellow was aglow with indignation and injured pride. He turned back a moment before rushing on, addressing Diana with words of reassurance:

"Just you don't worry, my dear: I'll see that that scoundrel doesn't get away with his highhandedness. I'll show you what he and his insinuating talk about me amount to. Shorty! he called me. I'll— You just make yourself easy here and don't worry." With that he rushed on toward the front of the hall and the broad stairs.

Lynx was on the verge of stepping from his place of concealment and returing to Diana's room, with Chenault gone. But his ear caught footsteps approaching along the hall from the direction of the back stairs. A colored maid appeared with a tray. She stopped at Diana's door, knocked, then opened the door.

"Missey sent up some tea and fixings to whet your appetite for supper," Lynx heard her announce in a pleasant contralto drawl. A moment later, having served the tray, she reappeared and closed the door behind her. Lynx watched as she paused, then alarm was jangling through him as her eyes suddenly turned to the narrow door behind which he was hiding. She stepped toward it, as if with sudden remembrance of something, her hand outstretched for the knob. Lynx's only chance was to wedge the door against her pull by using his knife blade for a lever. It was a slim chance, with a good chance on the other side that a hard reef on the door would snap the high-tempered steel of his blade. But it was the only chance he had.

Lynx felt the maid's first sharp tug on the nob; heard her mumbled exclamation of disgust at the door's stubbornness, and knew a satisfaction in the ability of his knife to meet the situation. There were several more sharp tugs. Still he held the door fast, grinning somewhat now at the maid's mumbled bewilderment. She paused after her last failure, as if regarding the offending door. Then she turned and seemed to be on her way, Lynx following the sound of her footsteps when she passed beyond his limited line of vision.

But after the first few quick steps she stopped abruptly, and his hopes fell. Then her voice raised:

"Andrew! Andrew come up here and open the broom door for me. I want a dusting rag a minute and it seems swoll shut. I can't get it."

Lynx preferred not to appear to be hiding and suffer outright discovery. He stepped into the hall quickly, quietly, closing the door behind him and taking a backward step. Thus he hoped he appeared to have just come up the hall when the maid's eyes glanced back at the irritating door.

"May I help you?" Lynx murmured, smiling pleasantly with a short bow. He touched the nob and the door swung open easily.

But his pleasantness and accommodation aroused no confidence in the maid's dusky bosom. "Lordy!" she murmured, her teeth chattering as if thinking that only a ghost could take a body so by surprise. "Lordy!" she repeated, her eyes rolling whitely, as her breath sucked in with added emphasis. Then her feet took wing and she flew for the stairs.

Wasting no time to curse the luck, Lynx dodged into Diana's room. She sprang out of a chair where she had been sipping tea, letting the cup go flying, at the unexpected sight of him.

"We've got to get out of here, but fast," Lynx declared in a clipped, low tone, crossing quickly to one of the big windows. "I ducked into a broom close across the hall to wait until your new boyfriend left, and the maid had to remember something she wanted to do with a dust rag."

"What's the matter anyhow, Lesky?" Diana demanded. "What was all that crazy talk you were doing about Paul's man getting Big Red drunk and knifing Marie and taking over the boats and you getting them back and all?"

"All but the getting them back part is true," Lynx replied briefly. "I was throwing in that and some of the other to sort of mix Chenault up. I don't know just what the deal is, but I wanted to give him something else to think about for awhile. I *do* know we've got to do a vanishing act, pronto."

"If you confused him as badly as you did me he doesn't know whether he's coming or going by now," Diana complained. "Why we have to get out of here I don't know, but I'll trust you for a reason. What's it going to do to my new clothes, though?"

"You should worry about that," Lynx returned shortly. "You should have seen Marie's after she'd swum the river and your friend's office boy had put a knife through her to give them some added color. Here—" he heaved a window open wide and leaned out to try the strength of the thick vine that covered the rough stone facing of the outside wall. Satisfied, he glanced back to complete his instructions: "You climb on my back and freeze tight. Quick about it."

"What would the good ladies of the neighborhood say if they saw this?" Diana murmured as she obeyed.

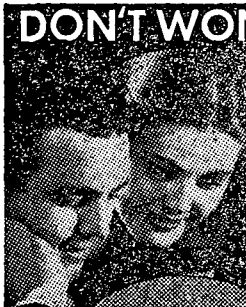
"Just do some tall praying that no one sees us," Lynx directed as he adjusted his balance to Diana's weight. "Being seen at this trick might cook our goose worse than you can imagine."

He crawled across the window sill then, praying the rank growth of climbing vine would take their double weight. Clear of the

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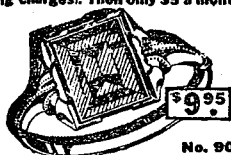
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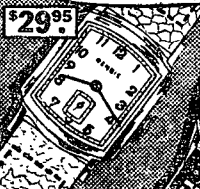
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sill, he paused long enough to close the window behind so that the way of their exit would not be too obvious. Then he went to the ground, traveling little slower than an outright fall so as to enforce a strain on one portion of the vine no longer than could be helped.

OUTSIDE an evening storm was brewing, threatening thunderheads having billowed up to blot out the late sun so that an early twilight was descending. Lynx took them quickly, thankfully, into the welcome shelter of the thickening shadow of a nearby hedge, lining the driveway from the stable at the rear of the grounds. He was hoping that Chenault had left the house before the maid's alarm was spread, but not counting on it. They needed transportation or concealment, and the barn offered a possibility of either or both. So he headed for it.

Lynx came within sight of the stable just in time to see the old colored coachman in the act of mounting to the driver's seat of Chenault's carriage. His magic draw put one of his matched Dragoons into his hand as he slipped through the hedge and sprinted forward. He had his gun muzzle in the coachman's back before the old fellow knew anyone else was about.

"I want to borrow this rig," Lynx murmured. "You got no objections—I hope." He gave a significant nudge with the menacing gun muzzle.

"No sir!" the old driver declared, peering tensely over one shoulder, his eyes rolling with fear at the feel of the gun. "I never argues with a man what's got a gun in mah back."

"You're smarter than most people that consider themselves your betters," Lynx declared quietly. "Climb down quick."

A moment later, with Diana on the cushioned seat inside, Lynx spoke to the team, sending them forward at a quiet walk. There seemed only one way out to the main road and that was through the front grounds. So he chose to take a quiet gait that would not attract attention and thus bring them nearer the main road before an alarm was sounded.

But though Lynx maintained an outer calm and a low, easy voice for the horses, tension piled up within him as they rolled unhurriedly along through the lowering shadows of the pleasant circular drive around the side of the great house. He had no way of knowing what to expect, how many men Chenault might have around the place, or what kind of a fight would come to him once the alarm was sounded. Every turn of the wheels brought him closer to a definite answer to all such questions, however.

With a bit more darkness to shield him he

might have reached the broad avenue into which the circular side drives turned before the majestic front entrance of the great stone house. But that avenue leading out through the front of the grounds to the public road before was still yards away when the front door jumped open and banty-like Paul Chenault popped out upon the pillared porch, his voice lashing angrily at the hulking figure of a man who followed him.

Lynx did not wait to be sighted. It was still too light to escape detection, once Chenault's eyes glanced his way. He preferred to be on the fly when it happened.

"Ah-ha-a-a-Yah!" One startling whoop lifted the four-horse team into its collars, jumping it from an easy trot into a hard run. The suddenly flying coach came abreast the wide porch in a flash and was wheeling madly around the curve into the avenue leading from the grounds before Chenault and his companion could respond.

"It's them! That's him on the box!" Lynx caught the little trader's cry of outrage. And then sounded the angry voice of a gun, an orange tongue of flame flicking out into the dusk, and the snarl of hot lead passed nearby. But Chenault's angry voice stopped the gun play. "You might hit the girl, you fool! Get the saddlers!"

Another moment and Lynx had his hands full tooling the running team around the sharp corner outside the gate and onto the public road. And then he pulled the whip from its socket and encouraged the horses to do their best by cracking it above the tips of their ears. But fast as they were, there was little chance of outdistancing or eluding mounted pursuit. Lynx decided to try confusing those who would soon be after him by resorting to the unexpected. He swung the team into the first street heading down the hill, still keeping them at a dangerous run, making directly for Chenault's office and company stable on Front Street along the river.

Chapter V

TRAIL'S END

LYNX gambled and won on the hunch that the hostler at the company stable would not yet know of Chenault's enmity for him.

"Paul said you could stake Miss Livingstone and me to a couple of good fast saddlers," he announced brightly, flashing the barnman a friendly salute from the box after pulling the team to a fancy halt in the very driveway of the livery—thus getting it off the street and out of sight. "He and his man were going to use the other horses up at the house."

"Shore, I guess I can," the hostler nodded, running a critical eye over the sweating, blow-

Satan Sends the Buskskin Brigade

ing team. "I hope you take it a little easier like with them though," he grumbled pointedly. "Chenault hates like hell to have his horses run any that ain't just plumb necessary."

"Sure, we'll take it easy," Lynx agreed, springing lightly down from the box. "We pushed the team getting here for fear you might be closed up for the night."

"Well I reckon I would have at that, too," the livery keeper acknowledged, "if it hadn't been for that there horse showing up just a few minutes ago." He pointed to a bay horse in a near stall, and Lynx's eyes, following his finger's direction, recognized the saddle even before he walked forward a bit to where he could see the horse carrying it. It was the horse he had set loose with an empty saddle up on the Missouri that very morning. And now the horse had come home.

"That horse belong here does he?"

"Yep. Green River Tomas' favorite, he is. Green River's the boss' right hand man. Him and Brule Bayard's thicker'n blood kin. I don't understand how come this horse come in without him. Brule'll be mighty upset about it—and the boss will too, I reckon. Will you take him word about it for me? Green River's been gone off somewheres two three weeks. I don't know where. But his horse coming in alone this way, the boss'll want to know."

"Sure, we'll take the word," Lynx nodded easily. But inside tension was beginning to mount again, for minutes might make all the difference between a clean escape and failure. "You slap saddles on a pair of good ones, and we'll take the word to Chenault while you tend the carriage horses," he suggested.

"Might be best at that," the hostler decided. "I'll have you ready to ride in a minute."

"You see that horse," Lynx murmured to Diana when the stableman was out of hearing, going about saddling their horses. Diana eyed the bay wonderingly. "I found him tied in the timber upriver where we got shot at this morning," Lynx informed her briefly. "I turned him loose to bring his empty saddle home. This is home. You heard what the man just said."

"You mean Paul sent—"

"Later," Lynx cut her off with an urgent whisper as the hostler led the first saddled horse from a stall. "Let's be away from here just as quickly as possible."

"But I don't understand—"

Lynx did not wait to hear the rest of Diana's puzzled protest, striding forward to take the reins of the first horse which carried a sidesaddle. He motioned Diana forward and helped her up, quickly. A moment later the second horse was ready.

"Thanks a lot," Lynx nodded his gratitude



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as he swung up and settled himself in the leather. He snapped a quick, informal gesture of salute. Then they rode into the darkening street. When they were well clear of the barn Diana raised her insistent voice again.

"Lynx, I want to know what's—"

But again her question did not get properly finished, much less receive an answer. For Lynx caught the sudden hammer of the hoofs of hard ridden horses, raising from somewhere not far behind. He jumped his horse forward, grabbing Diana's mount by the bit to keep her with him as plunged into the blackness of a narrow alleyway between two buildings. There he reined up, waiting. A moment later two horsemen raced by.

Lynx waited until the drumming hoof beats began to diminish in the distance. Then he nudged his mount into motion again, bringing them out in the main alley behind the buildings. From there he went forward without a pause, keeping to the places of deepest darkness in the growing night. And at last they left the tumult of raucous river-front sounds behind. But he kept on, circling shantytown and coming back to river above it before he finally reined up.

"I left Marie hidden at a place in that fish-eaters settlement," he told Diana. "I think she's safe enough. But she thinks the boats and fur and Big Red have been taken some place upriver to a Voodoo Island, she thought Bayard called it. We've got to find it and get there before your little friend and Bayard do."

"Are you really telling me that you think Paul has been up to some double-dealing with us?" Diana demanded.

"It seems to look somewhat like it," Lynx declared.

"I can't believe it!" Diana exclaimed. "Father trusted him. He told me—"

"Your father's dead, too," Lynx pointed out abruptly. "I don't pretend to know all the kinks along this snake track, but I've got a hunch I may get acquainted with the rest before this night's done. I'd rather for you to let me take you to where Marie is and wait there. But I don't suppose—"

"No!" Diana declared emphatically.

A mile beyond they came upon the winking yellow light of a farmstead. They rode in, amid the uproar of a tail-wagging pack of coon dogs.

"I'm wondering could you tell me if there's such a place as Voodoo Island along the river here?" Lynx asked the settler who came to the door.

"Sure is," the fellow declared. "Out in mid-river about a mile above here. It ain't no place for a white man though. The darkies have spirit meetings there ever so often. It's

Satan Sends the Buskskin Brigade

a God-forsaken place—nothing on the mainland on either side but marsh and timber. You can't get much closer than here without a boat."

"I'm wondering if you could take us there?" Lynx demanded.

"Not me—I don't want nothing to do with them darkies' spirit grounds."

"You got a boat you'll rent, then?" Lynx persisted.

"Why you want to go there so bad, especially this kind of a black night?" the farmer wondered.

"This young lady has had a fortune in prime beaver stolen from her and we have reason to believe it has been hidden there," Lynx answered freely.

"I'd leave the thief keep it then," the settler opined, wagging his head gravely. "But if you're plumb bound to go I'll make you the loan of a good boat, anyhow."

Leading the way with a lantern, the farmer took them to the river and a small landing to which was tied up a trim flat-bottom rowboat.

"Who shall I send word to if you don't come back?" he inquired encouragingly, as Lynx stepped aboard and steadied the boat as Diana followed.

"There's no one, thanks," Lynx chuckled dryly. "You needn't bother."

A moment later they were beyond the feeble light of the lantern, out in the full sweep of the great Mississippi. And after that Lynx settled down to steady battle against the relentless current. The night had settled so black around them that he could not see Diana only a yard away at the other end of the little boat from him. Overhead there was the increasingly uneasy grumbling of the brewing storm. It seemed they were alone in an empty world of swirling water and menacing blackness. And the occasional shock of collision with a chunk of floating driftwood did nothing to quiet Lynx's nervous tension.

Then, just when Lynx was beginning to wonder if he was making any headway against the current or if he was merely holding his own and standing still, the black form of an island loomed up to the right of him. He rowed on upriver, along the half-mile of its length. About midway he caught the momentary gleam of an inland campfire, hidden in the heavy brush and timber that grew upon it. But he kept on until he reached the upper end. Then swinging down the other side a bit, he found a protected backwater and sent the little boat ashore.

"Well, I guess we've found Voodoo Island," he murmured. "Do you want to stay here and guard the boat?"

"Try and leave me," Diana challenged in a



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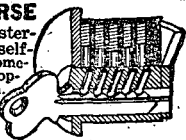
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guarded whisper. "You get out of my sight and I'll scream."

"That'd be a damned fool thing to do," Lynx chuckled. "That light dress of yours is a poor get-up to go scouting in. You ought to have your buckskins."

"I've got a black petticoat underneath it that'll do until we find the mackinaw and I can get my buckskins again," Diana declared, equal to the occasion. Quickly she shucked out of the offensively light colored dress and discarded it under the boat seat. Her black undergarment would make her blend into the night, but it might rustle against the brush. Lynx left that problem for her to worry about, however. He stepped from the boat and with her hand firmly anchored on the back of his belt slipped into the impenetrable, oppressive blackness of the underbrush and timber.

IT took an hour, or perhaps more, of careful scouting to locate the big mackinaw and bull-boat, beached high and dry in a secluded cove along the island shore. Lynx waited long enough for Diana to discard her city clothing. Then they began to close in on the camp in the island's center.

Big Red, they found, had recovered from the effects of the treacherous drink that had laid him open to easy capture. He was firmly anchored to the gnarled trunk of a great tree. Four scar-faced ruffians with the stamp of keelboatmen in their hard features hunkered around the fire. They were off guard, plainly anticipating no trouble. To Lynx the set-up looked too easy. He was fixing to walk in behind them with his guns ready, give them a chance to quit cold or take a gut full of hot lead, when a hail was suddenly raised from somewhere out on the river.

"Ahoy there, Red River men!"

"Ahoy!" one of the strangers at the fire answered, climbing to his feet. "Pull in and have a drink."

Moments later, as Lynx and Diana watched, after much cursing and crashing through the brush Brule Bayard appeared.

"Everything going all right here?" he demanded.

"Right as rain," the spokesman for the strange renegades answered.

"What'd I tell you, boss?" Bayard demanded with a coarse chuckle, twisting to look back the way he had come. Then dapper little Paul Chenault appeared behind him, not looking quite so dapper and completely confident. Lynx felt Diana, at his side, suck in a quick breath of surprise.

"I couldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," she whispered. "The little snake!"

"Are you men sure you still have the fur

Satan Sends the Buskskin Brigade

and all?" Chenault demanded, brushing nervously at his clothing.

"We can mighty, easy show you," the spokesman replied. "What's the matter anyhow?"

"The redbeard's partner put the Injun sign on the boss, that's all," Bayard chuckled. "He's a windy gent and he had the boss believing he'd come at you fellows with a crew and taken the beaver away from you."

"Ain't no one bothered us," the other declared. "But you look like you'd run up against a whip saw. What happened? That kitten you went into the river after get her claws into you?"

"It was that redbeard's partner and his gang," Bayard growled, becoming surly. "But I ain't finished with them—nor with her either, yet."

"How many was there?"

"Half a dozen, maybe," Bayard declared. "Maybe more."

"We've got to have more men," Chenault spoke up nervously. "We've gone too far, there's too much at stake now to risk not having men enough to win any fight that comes at us. What if that long haired killer came swooping down on us now with a band of mountain man cutthroats like him? What kind of a fight could we make? We've got to get more men. Damn Beaver Ruck anyhow! He has the crew I had planned—"

"What've I been telling you all along," Bayard demanded. "You been so anxious that no one but us and Beaver Ruck should know about your plans for fear some of the crowd that lives with you up there on the bluffs would think you wasn't respectable. Of course we need more men, and I'm going to get them. You boys," he turned back to Big Red's guards, "have any friends that'd like to go into trapping in a big way? We're grabbing a corner on the last beaver country that's left, and we're going to need help skinning it."

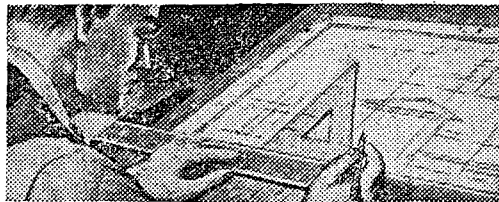
"I reckon I could round up the crew you want down in St. Louis right tonight," the spokesman declared. "Keelboating is shot to hell these days."

"Take him and go get them," Chenault directed, nodding to Bayard. "And have them bring our keelboat when you get them. Bring plenty of swivel-gun ammunition. And you can pay that darkie off that we hired to row us up here."

"Pay him off hell!" Bayard scoffed. "I'm going to shoot him for fish feed when we get out in the river. Think I want to leave him loose to spread word to all the blacks that we're using this here island?"

"Well make it lively, whatever you do," Chenault encouraged. "I'll stay here and tell

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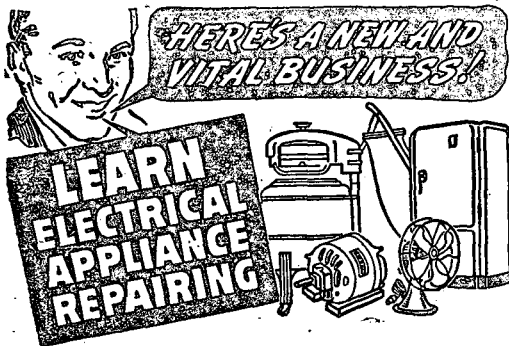
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these men our plans. We've got to get organized and ready to—"

Lynx chose that moment to come out of the brush. He was there, a big gun in either hand, no one aware of his presence until he spoke.

"Get your hands up and freeze," he demanded in a voice that was low, but so grimly cold that it carried to every ear like the clear toned warning of a bell. "Bayard, you cut—"

But Big Red had come suddenly to life, after the first shocked moment of unbelief, bellying flat words of warning:

"Look alive, partner! There's another of the keelboat varmints on the prowl out there in the brush some—"

A scream from Diana cut him short, snapping Lynx around just in time to see the dark figure of a man plunging out of the background blackness, reaching for her. He fired point blank past Diana, knowing he must cut the fellow down before he could reach her.

And then as Diana's attacker collapsed in mid-stride, Lynx whipped back to cover the others again. But he found the other keelboatmen almost upon him, a ready knife flashing in the fist of each one.

A quick backward step gave him time enough to hammer lead into the foremost of the charging killer crew. And then a snag in the brush behind him caught his heel and tripped him in his frantic effort to keep clear of them until his gun could do its work.

Chapter VI

SNAKE CURE

"DON'T kill him! There's information I want from him first!" Lynx heard Chenault's piercing voice directing as he was smothered against the ground by an avalanche of rock-muscled bodies thundering down upon him as he fell. And then a smashing blow glazed his temple, scattering his senses. He kept his grasp upon the tail-ends of consciousness, but pretended complete senselessness. Blows rained upon him a moment longer. And then when he made no resistance they ceased as Chenault's exultant voice cut in:

"Don't let the girl get away. A hundred dollars to the man who brings her back!"

All the punishing weight upon Lynx evaporated as if by magic as the renegades forsook him in quest of the reward for Diana's capture. But he was still too dazed to take advantage of the opportunity. There was the sound of a brief struggle out in the brush not far away. And then he heard Diana's panting breath as she was dragged back.

"What a little wild-cat," he heard Chenault

marveling. "I hardly recognized you, my dear, in that clothing. I think it's becoming to you, though. Seems to fit your personality. My what sport it will be, taming you into a well mannered little house pet. I'd meant to let you take your time, falling in love with me—but after what you've seen tonight I can't afford to do that. I'll have to rush you a bit and marry you tonight. A wife can't testify against her husband, you know," he purred.

"You'll never see the day or night that I'd marry you," Diana gasped. "There's no way you can make me."

"Foolish child," Chenault chuckled, having fully regained all his banty-like confidence. "I have a marrying friend, Captain Twid, master of the Orleans Belle, who will marry me to any woman I can stand before him—even if I have to gag and bind her to make her behave. You will see, before another hour. Bayard, come—"

Lynx had to interrupt his pleasant speculations and anticipations, rudely, by coming violently alive at that moment. One of the keelboatmen, remembering the failure to disarm the fallen trapper in their eagerness to capture Diana, had returned to attend to that detail. And as he stooped to relieve Lynx of the matched guns that had fallen beside him,

an arm of spring steel had, unexpectedly whipped around his neck and jerked him forward to meet the flashing blade that buried itself hilt deep in his throat.

"Help me get her to the boat!" Chenault screamed at his bewildered lieutenant, seizing Diana in a grip like that of a mad man. Together they plunged away into the screening blackness of the brush, dragging the struggling girl between them, leaving the revived mountain man for their keelboatman killers to handle.

But initiative was on Lynx's side now. A snap roll brought him to his feet, the deadly guns cradled in his hands again. And before the two killers could converge upon him he cut them down.

Quickly then he freed his knife from the throat of their fallen companion and slashed Big Red free of the imprisoning bonds that held him to the tree.

"Get the gal away from that little polecat," Big Red murmured, shaking himself awkwardly, trying to restore circulation. "Go after them. I'll be right behind you!"

But fast as Lynx had moved he was a moment too late in reaching the place on the bank where the renegade's boat had been beached. It was gone, and there was no time to go for



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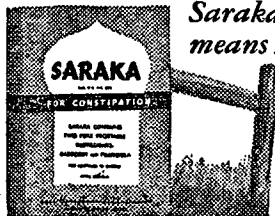
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

his own boat at the upper end of the island. He could not chance letting the boat get far from him in the blackness of the night. It would be too easy to miss. Without hesitation he plunged into the river. He heard Big Red hit the water behind him.

For the first hundred yards Lynx was haunted by a plaguing fear that in spite of his fast action the slippery Chenault had somehow eluded him. And then, just when dread was beginning to take root in his innerds, he made out the shape of the boat not far ahead; a blacker blotch against the black of the night, outlined by the faint reflection on the water.

Lynx paused for Big Red to catch up. "Can you get around them," he murmured, "and persuade the man at the oars to stop rowing?" He pressed his knife into Big Red's hand. They had to work fast because their buckskin clothing was taking up water so that further swimming in it would very soon be impossible.

Big Red drove forward with powerful, but quiet strokes that carried him beyond the boat. Then he came up along-side the bow and the oars suddenly ceased their motion.

Lynx flashed up beside the stern, laid a vise-like grip upon Bayard that seemed to lift him bodily like one would a little child, and then together they disappeared.

A MOMENT later when Lynx again surfaced Chenault was trying to move forward from where he had been seated so that he could get a grip upon Diana. But Diana was rocking the boat so violently that he was tossed clear into the water.

"I can't swim! I can't swim! Save me—I can't—"

A moment later there was the brief sound of frantic thrashing. Another hoarse cry, strangling to an abrupt end. Another silence. Then a last faint cry. After that the silence was unbroken except for the murmur of the river.

Lynx felt Diana shudder as he heaved himself aboard and sat down beside her.

"Cold?" he asked.

Diana's head shook a brief negative gesture. "Just chicken hearted, I guess. That seemed—pretty brutal, even if he did deserve it. I'm not criticizing," she added hastily. "It's just that—"

"You can't afford to listen to your heart when you're dealing with snakes," Lynx murmured. "Maybe you can take out their fangs—so they'll not menace you again. But they can still breed new snakes who'll have new fangs that may kill your children."

"I hadn't thought about all that—that way," Diana acknowledged. "I guess he got

Satan Sends the Buskskin Brigade

off easy, considering what he caused some of the others to suffer. I'm sorry I—"

But Lynx cut her off, his voice raising, directed to the colored boy at the oars, inquiring: "Do you know where there's a good marrying man who can do a first rate job for a feller?"

"I sure do," the boy replied. "I knows where there's the marryin'est man on the river."

"Then find him; and hurry!" Lynx slapped his drenched buckskins.

FROM the seat Chenault had vacated not long before, Big Red spoke up for the first time since he and Lynx had come out of the river. His tone was strangely hesitant and sober. "Could we stop by where you left Marie—before you visit that marrying man?" he wondered. "I—I got something I'd like to ask her. Maybe—well, if she's in favor, would it be all the same to you to—well, to have the job done up double—or something?"

"Lordy, lordy!" Lynx exclaimed incredulously. "Will wonders never cease. Do you think we'll ever see the old Rockies, breathe the sweet air of the far high country again, O'Hara—if we go through with this business?" he asked pointedly with a low chuckle. But Big Red got no chance to voice his speculations upon the matter for Diana took the ball.

"You'll stay in St. Louis by yourselves if you don't," she announced casually. "Marie and I decided days ago that we were going to outfit ourselves with a couple of wagon loads of furnishings and join an emigrant train headed for Oregon Territory and God's country. If you want to go along, we'll hire you out as scouts to the wagon-master. They say men of experience are in demand—and we'll recommend you."

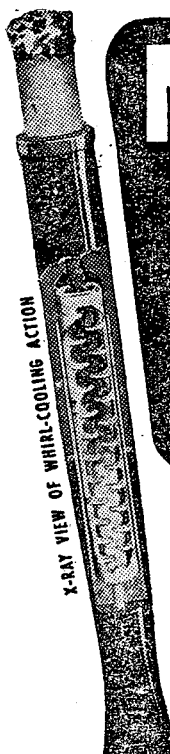
"Beat at my own game," Lynx mourned. "She's getting worse than a mountain man for laying on the hooraw. A man's just kidding himself when he thinks he's out ahead of his woman, from the way the sign on the trail reads right now."

"Here we is," the boy chuckled. Twisting, Lynx glimpsed the rickety landing sliding up out of the night just ahead. "That's where the marrying man lives," the colored boy added.

And then came the rain, by the buckets full, as if the folks upstairs were staging a premature charivari. But there *were* two sets of "I do's" exchanged not long afterwards. And at least four happy folks along the old Mississippi that night noticed the rain no more than if it had only been a scattering of rice falling.

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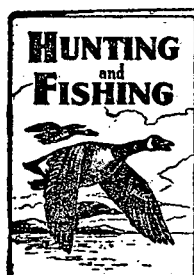


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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 71)

bag, had found and emptied the bottle of it down here, so that it would soon overwhelm and put him to sleep.

For a moment, panic seized Doc, a sick feeling of helplessness. He was sweating, his hands shaking. If he could only fight back! But he didn't have a chance, nor did any of the others. Once he succumbed, he'd never wake from that drugged sleep—

Realization of that fact steadied him. He was going to die. But, since that was inevitable, it didn't matter now. If he could still save his patients.

Maybe he could do something for them, even if he could not for himself. Doc was steady again, that moment of panic gone. Holding his breath grimly against the odor of the chloroform, he fumbled in a pocket, found a match, and scratched it.

The flare showed about what he had expected to see. A box with paper wrappings, and the flame licked greedily at it, flared up redly. Pinching his nose, picking his way in the new light of the spreading flames, Doc retreated.

This room was choked with debris, most of which was tinder-dry, and the fire was spreading fast. The light revealed a stairway, leading up to the trap-door, but that was fastened up above, and the stairway was already a mass of flame.

The fire was having one good effect, though. The chloroform had spilled mostly on one box, and that was burning, the stuff gone before the whole cellar could be saturated with it. He could still breathe, but that wouldn't help him long. The whole room would soon be a roaring mass of fire. Already, as he retreated, the heat was becoming oppressive.

And then he heard what he had been waiting for—a new sound from up above, the pound of panicky feet as the crowd stampeded from the banquet hall. Doc smiled grimly. The flames were starting to eat up through the floor above, now, and they could clean out all that prepared food and the evil of it in a hurry. And there had been no time for anyone to eat.

This miner's hall was far enough off by itself that the blaze was not apt to endanger other buildings. Light reflected back from

DON'T WASTE WASTE PAPER!

WITH GUTS, GUN, AND SCALPEL

something, mirror-like, and Doc grabbed a box and smashed at it with sudden wild hope. A window! He broke it out, crawled out into the red-lit night, and got to his feet. As he did so, there was an insane bellow of rage, and Matt Peavey rushed at him.

Doc discovered that there was a double purpose in that rush. Bursting through the floor, off at the side, the fire had spread faster, up above, and now the whole side of the building above him was beginning to flame fiercely. The heat was a blistering thing, despite the arctic chill of forty below. Peavey had seen him crawl out, and had rushed at him—ostensibly to help him, but really to fling him back into that fiery pit!

Barely on his feet, Doc was knocked off them by Peavey's rush. But as he went down, his arms reached out, closed around Peavey's legs, and he twisted with all his strength. Peavey went down as well. His head shot through the cellar window from which Doc had just crawled, and in the impetus of that jerking tumble, he went clear through it and in.

There was one smothered howl. Then another pair of arms grabbed Doc and dragged him back as the wall above caved down in a smother of flame, and he saw Tom McTigue, smudged and singed, but grinning.

"Close call, Doc," he gasped. "I—just got here—they'd knocked me out and left me for dead—guess we fooled 'em, though. Too tough to kill."

Then Doc spoke to the crowd, briefly but pointedly. A growl went up as they began to understand, and before the sheer fury of that sound, Peavey's henchmen broke and ran for their lives. And, as McTigue reported, grinning, some time later:

"Danged if they didn't manage to wallow through that snow and get away! Though, out on a night like this, without food or shelter—" he shivered, shrugged. "I'd rather taken chances with this crowd. Good riddance, though."

That was right enough. But Doc was thinking. If they'd got out, so could he, on the morrow, back to his own neglected practice. Deadman's didn't need him now, particularly. This night had purged the camp.

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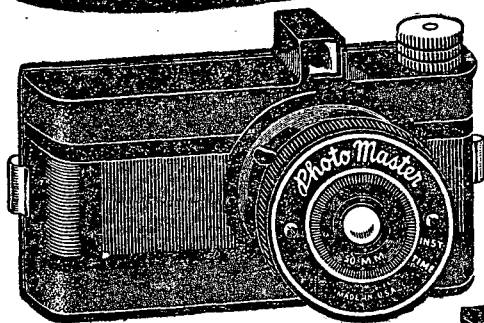
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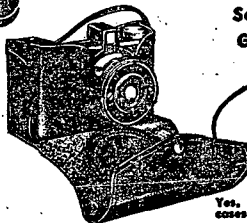
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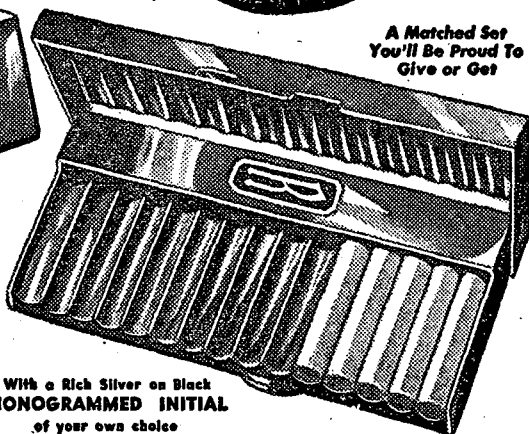
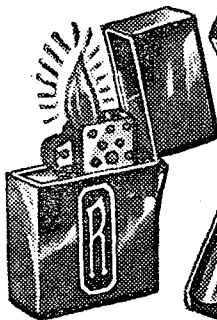
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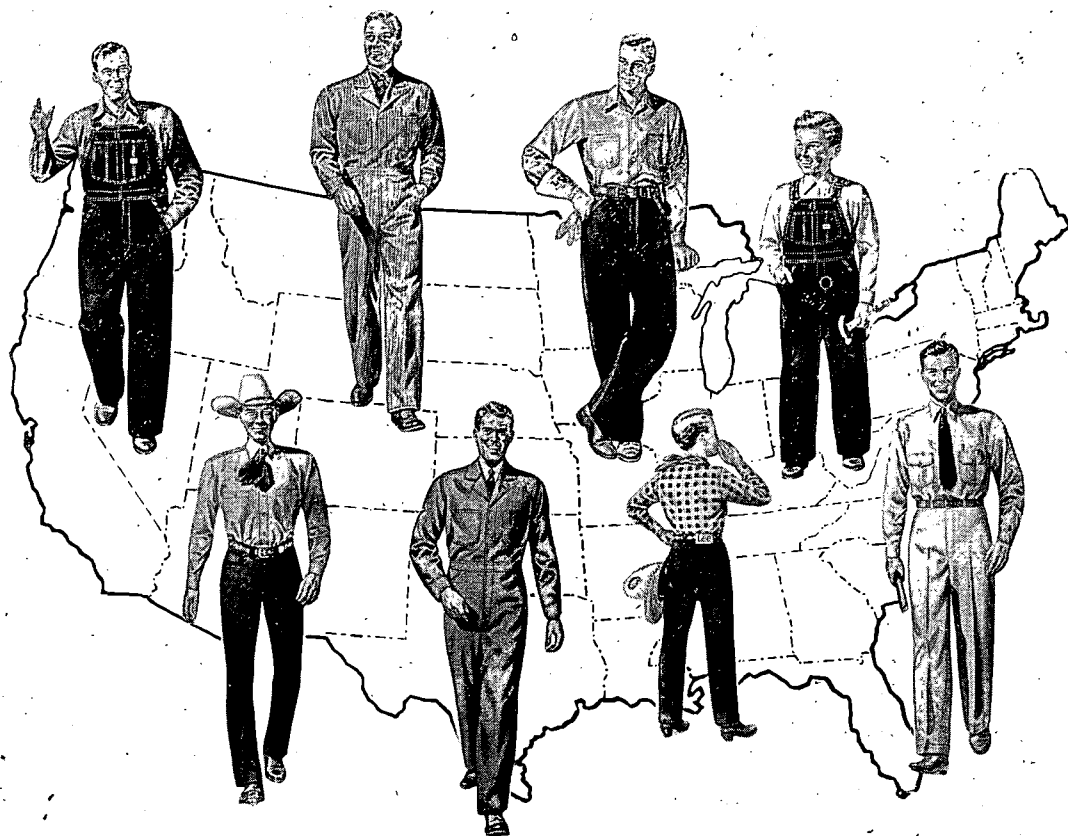
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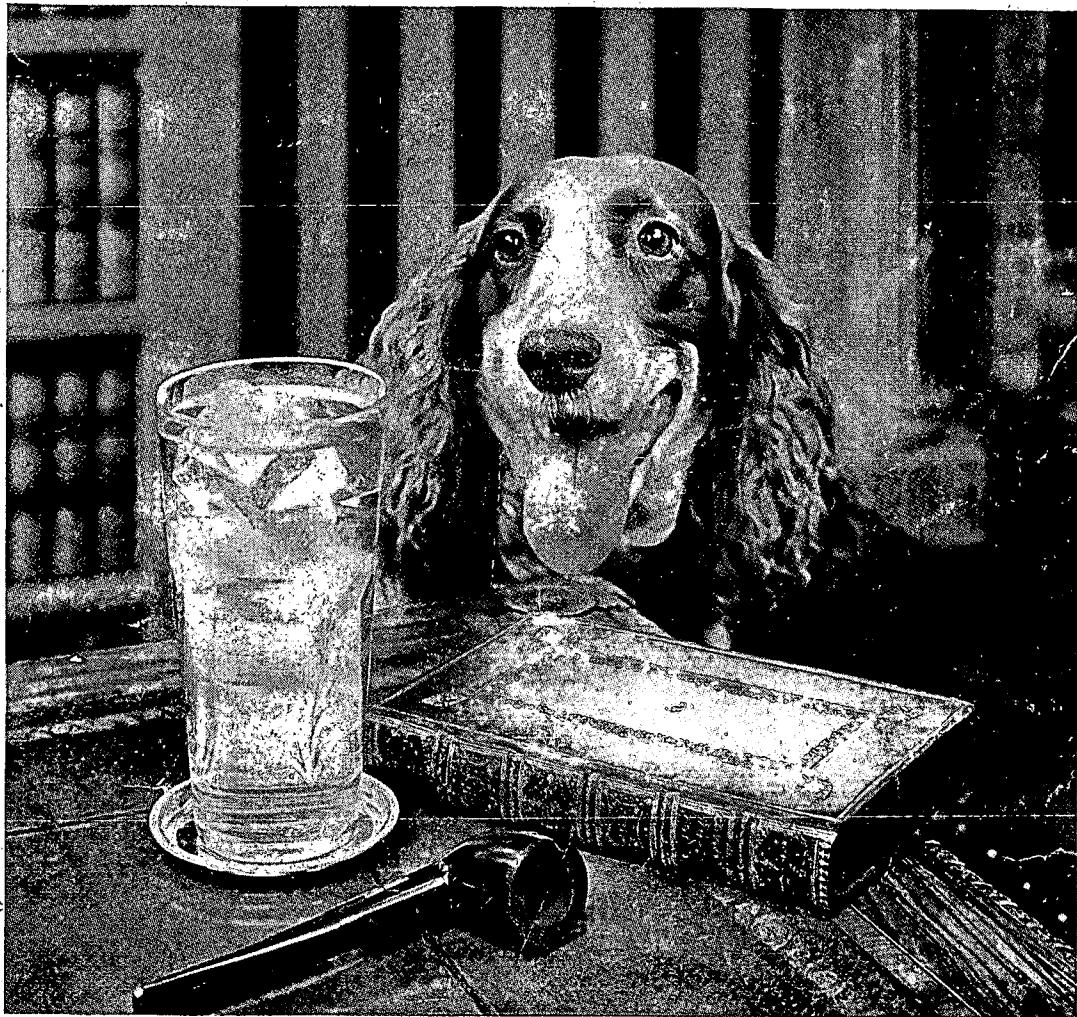
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